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Cimabue and the Franciscans

HOLLY FLORA



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The idea for this book was first born in 2006, when I was a guest curator for The Frick Collection's focus exhibition, *Cimabue and Early Italian Devotional Painting*. While completing the research for that show as an Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at the Frick, I realized that Cimabue's works were overripe for a reinterpretation and reevaluation via current scholarly methods. My first thanks for this project therefore go to my then-colleagues at the Frick, first among them Denise Allen, now Curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose brilliant insight on Cimabue was constantly inspiring. The support of Colin B. Bailey, Susan Grace Galassi, and my fellow Mellon Fellows Yvonne Elet and Xavier Salomon, as well as the staff of the Frick Art Reference Library, were crucial to this book's origins.

Life intervened—a tenure-track job, a first book, and a daughter later, I was finally able to turn attention to the Cimabue book project again during my year as the Millicent Mercer Johnson Rome Prize Fellow in Medieval Studies at the American Academy in Rome. My work was incredibly enhanced by all of my fellow Fellows in 2010–11, as well as the wonderful staff of the Academy's library. Then-director Chris Celenza and his wife Anna Celenza were and continued to be staunch supporters of the project. I was also fortunate via the Academy to meet Lila Yawn, who shared her expertise of medieval Rome most generously. That year, advice from many Italian colleagues—most notably Francesca Manzari, Chiara Frugoni, Chiara Balbarini, and Alessandro Tomei—provided many insights that shaped the project. I am also grateful to the staff of the Vatican Library, the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence (the Hertziana was closed for renovation that year) and the Collegio San Bonaventura.

Upon my return from Rome, two happy events stalled the Cimabue project: the arrival of a second daughter, and an invitation from my longtime friend and colleague Trinita Kennedy to work on a major exhibition she organized, *Sanctity Pictured: The Art of the Dominican and Franciscan Orders in Renaissance Italy*, which opened in 2014. Despite it being a slight detour from Cimabue, my work for this project was fundamental in shaping my thinking about the Franciscans and their deployment of works of art.

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INTRODUCTION

Intersecting Histories

Cenni di Pepo (c. 1240–1302), known as Cimabue, is considered a founding father of Italian Renaissance painting, famous for his dramatic wall paintings, imposing painted crucifixes, and majestic panels of the enthroned Madonna and Child. Cimabue's place in the history of art was cemented by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), whose *Vite* portrayed Cimabue as harbinger of a *renovatio* of Greek and Roman visual forms and a new interest in naturalism born in Florence in the late thirteenth century.¹ For Vasari and others, the full fruition of this early 'Renaissance' came via Cimabue's successor Giotto (d. 1337).² Cimabue was therefore inscribed into the canon of art history as the evolutionary link between the traditionally conceived 'Middle Ages' and 'Renaissance'.³

For Vasari, individual artists like Cimabue and Giotto were the primary drivers of the *renovatio* in art seen in the decades around the year 1300. Nevertheless, subsequent authors have credited the artistic changes of the period equally to the rise of the mendicant orders.⁴ At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, Henry Thode proposed that the groundbreaking works of Cimabue and Giotto reflected the theological interests of Franciscan patrons, making the Franciscans the true harbingers of the Renaissance.⁵ Although Thode's entire thesis never became mainstream, his approach underpins other, more recent attempts to connect artistic *renovatio* to the mendicants. The attention paid in art to naturalism and perspectival effects has been explained in terms of Saint Francis' reverence for nature—itself seen within the thirteenth-century revival of Aristotelean ideas about the validity of sensory experience and their relevance to religious devotion.⁶ The friars' role in the study of optics in Europe in the thirteenth century has also been cited as a catalyst for pictorial advances in optical realism.⁷ Scholars have linked the Franciscan practice of empathetic piety focused on Christ's humanity to art's renewed interest in emotional expression.⁸

1 For Vasari's discussions of Cimabue, with recent bibliography on the Vasarian view of the Renaissance, see Kim, *The Traveling Artist*, 54–62. For a revisionist treatment of the Vasarian view of Cimabue and Giotto, see Maginnis, *Painting*, pp. 385–408.

2 The comparison between Cimabue and Giotto remains a commonplace in art history textbooks; see for example Campbell and Cole, pp. 26–27.

3 For a summary of this traditional narrative of the Renaissance see Rosser, p. 475.

4 It should be noted here that Vasari also connects the works of Cimabue and of Giotto to the mendicants, but the agency for artistic change for Vasari still rests in the hands of the artists, whose inventions then helped the mendicants attract followers: Vasari states, for example, in his 1568 life of Ugolino da Siena that in the age of Giotto the novelties in art attracted followers to the Dominicans and Franciscans. See *Vite*, ed. Bettarini, p. 139.

5 Thode, *Francesco d'Assisi*, 357–443; for discussions of Thode's claims about the origins of the Renaissance, see

Bourdúa, *The Franciscans*, 8–9, and Bourdúa and Dunlop, *Art and the Augustinian Order*, 4–5. For an example of a more recent study making similar claims see Szakolczai, see especially part 2, and for a discussion of Cimabue and Bonaventure, see chapter 6.

6 For example, on the Franciscans and Aristotelean thought see Cook, 'The Early Representations', p. 3. The literature on sensory perception and Aristotle is too vast to cite here, but for a classic study see Summers, *The Judgment*.

7 See for example Edgerton, *The Mirror*, pp. 20–29, and Belting, *Florence and Baghdad*, chapter 4. More will be said about the Franciscans and optics in Chapter 1.

8 In her 2013 book on the Dominicans, for example, Joanna Cannon stated, 'Italy in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries is ... hailed as a place and time in which there was a growing interest in and mastery of the convincing representation of the visible world. Art became increasingly true to life in its depiction of protagonists, actions, emotions, and settings. The Franciscans have long been seen as key contributors to this cultural shift', Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, p. 56.

Increasingly, studies of late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Italian art have synthesized aspects of these biographical and patron-focused approaches to artistic change, recognizing the agency of acclaimed artists in the service of mendicant ideologies.⁹ Revisionist scholarship has also questioned traditional narratives of the 'Renaissance' itself, problematizing the Vasarian teleological vision of art reaching steadily towards a perfected revival of antique forms and optical realism.¹⁰ Thanks as well to the growing body of literature on art and the mendicant orders, we know much more now about the networks that linked ecclesiastical patrons, local friars, celebrated artists, and prominent devotees, as well as the function of works of art in religious practices.¹¹ The late thirteenth century is still seen as a nodal historical moment, but its complexities are being revealed in novel, multifaceted ways.

Cimabue's career, however, has not been reassessed within these new frameworks. Individual works by Cimabue have been examined in some recent analyses, but such treatment is usually brief, and his works are too often still discussed only in comparisons to Giotto.¹² This neglect is surprising given Cimabue's primacy in longstanding histories of the early Renaissance, as well as the fact that members of the Franciscan Order were his most frequent patrons. This book offers a fresh look at the broader question of artistic change in the late thirteenth century by examining the intersection of two histories: that of Cimabue, and that of the Franciscans. While focused on the work of a single artist, this study sheds new light on the religious motives and artistic means that fueled the period's visual and spiritual transformations. My analysis reveals that Cimabue's importance extends well beyond canonical notions of stylistic change. He and his Franciscan patrons engaged with complicated intellectual and theological ideas about materials, memory, beauty, and experience, creating innovative works of art that celebrated the Order and enabled new modes of Christian devotion. Cimabue's contributions need to be recognized for their wide-ranging scope and impact within the rapidly-evolving religious culture of the late thirteenth century. My examination of Cimabue's art thus allows for a re-assessment of his place in the history of art.

Cimabue: A Fraught History

Before describing the book's methodology and structure, I want to consider briefly the complicated histories of Cimabue and the Franciscans. The life and lore of Cimabue constitute something of a paradox. He is at once eminent, legendary in the history of art, but remains a deeply mysterious figure. Much of what has been believed about Cimabue does not come from documents written during his lifetime, but instead stems from a literary tradition established by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century authors.¹³ Writing circa 1405, for example, the humanist and chronicler Filippo

⁹ A number of more recent studies can be cited, but works representative of this methodological shift include the following: Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict*, the collection of essays in Ladis, *Giotto and the Franciscans*, and Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*.

¹⁰ For one example of this kind of revisionism see Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, pp. 80–81. For an overview of the changing views of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and 'early modernity' see Pericolo, 'Epilogue: The Shifting Boundaries', pp. 271–322.

¹¹ Among the growing works on the topic are major monographs published in the last five years including Bruzelius, *Preaching, Building, and Burying*; Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, and Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*.

¹² Cannon for example, treats Cimabue's Arezzo and Santa Croce crucifixes briefly in her monograph on the Dominicans, see Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 59–60 and for comparisons

of the Santa Croce crucifix to Giotto's Santa Maria cross, see pp. 62–65. Cooper and Robson sketch Cimabue contributions to the apse and transepts in the Upper Church at Assisi only as a means of setting up the back story for their main focus, the life of St Francis; see *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 82–87. Kim's recent study (see note 5 above) treats Cimabue's works only within a Vasarian reading, and Bokody, in his study of images within images in Italian painting, notes briefly Cimabue's fictive corbels and representations of Rome and Jerusalem in Cimabue's vault at Assisi; see Bokody, *Images-within-Images*, pp. 38–39 and 62–67. Frugoni offers a more in-depth analysis of Cimabue's Upper Church murals, but it is also tied to her larger study of the imagery of the entire Upper Church, see Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, chapter 6.

¹³ On Cimabue in the literary tradition see Benkard, *Das literarische*, pp. 35–40. For further discussion of this tradition see Rubin, Giorgio Vasari, pp. 289–96.

Villani declared that the revival of antiquity in the arts began with Cimabue, who 'summoned back with skill the decayed art of painting'.¹⁴ In the mid sixteenth century, Vasari reaffirmed the notion that Cimabue inaugurated a return to the naturalism of antiquity, dismissing thirteenth-century painting before Cimabue as conventional and stiff, rendered 'in that rude modern manner'.¹⁵ The artistic drought in Florence had been so extreme, Vasari maintained, that 'Greek' masters (by which Vasari meant Byzantine artists) had been summoned to Florence by the city government to 'restore to Florence the art of painting'.¹⁶ Assimilating and improving on this imported Greek style through constant study of and drawing after nature, Cimabue, as Vasari dramatically claimed, 'swept away that ancient manner, making everything ... a little more lively and more natural and softer than the manner of these Greeks'.¹⁷ Vasari thus declared Cimabue 'born to give first light to the art of painting'.¹⁸

Ultimately, however, for fifteenth and sixteenth century writers, Cimabue was only the first light of the revival of painting; the true light was instead his Florentine successor, Giotto. The Cimabue–Giotto nexus is rooted in the words of Dante, who made Cimabue an emblem of ephemeral artistic fame in the *Purgatorio*:

In painting Cimabue thought that he
Should hold the field, now Giotto has the cry
So that the other's fame is growing dim.¹⁹

The connection between these two artists became firmly inscribed in humanist narratives of Renaissance origins, and thus emerged the myth that Cimabue was Giotto's teacher.

Lorenzo Ghiberti, writing about 1447, perpetuated the legend, later repeated by Vasari and others, that Cimabue happened on the shepherd boy Giotto as he was drawing a sheep, and then took the young Giotto under his wing.²⁰ Another legendary anecdote found in the treatise of fifteenth-century architect Antonio Averlino (called Il Filarete) and in Vasari's biography describes how Giotto painted a fly so convincingly that Cimabue, thinking it was real, tried repeatedly to brush it away.²¹ Simultaneously, a legend of Cimabue's bitterness and belligerence emerged, again connected to his relationship to Giotto. Fourteenth-century commentators on Dante's *Commedia* speculated that Cimabue must have earned his nickname in reference to his simmering anger at his waning reputation.²² This idea persisted, informing the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite vision of Cimabue expressed in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, painted in 1852 (Fig. I.1). At the far right, dressed in blue, the elder Cimabue is shown in profile, gazing with a mixed expression of amazement and resentment as the younger Giotto sketches a portrait of the poet.

Was Cimabue's nickname in fact indicative of a difficult nature, as Rossetti attempted to capture? The first part of the word 'Cimabue', 'cima', can mean 'shears or cuts off the top of something' and can also denote a 'summit' or 'head'. 'Bue' or 'bove' (as some documents spell his name) denotes an

¹⁴ Villani, pp. 152–53, as translated in Baxandall, *Giotto*, p. 70; see also Barkan, *Unearthing*, p. 103.

¹⁵ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 51.

¹⁶ Vasari, *Lives*, pp. 51–52.

¹⁷ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 53.

¹⁸ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 51. In Italian, 'per dare e' primi lumi all'arte della pittura', Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. Bettarini-Barrochi, p. 35.

¹⁹ Credette Cimabue ne la pittura/tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido/si che la fama di colui è scura'. Dante, *Purgatorio*, p. 133.

²⁰ Ghiberti, *Commentarii*, vol. 2, p. 35. See also Bellosi, *La Pecora*, and on the question of the social standing and

profession of Giotto's family and the question of his having been a shepherd boy, see Schwarz and Theis, 'Giotto's Father', pp. 676–77.

²¹ In Filarete's version multiple flies are described. See Filarete, *Tratto*, vol. 2, p. 181, and for a discussion of this anecdote, see Land, 'Giotto's Fly', p. 14.

²² A number of writers who wrote commentaries on Dante's *Commedia* remarked on his lines of poetry regarding Cimabue and Giotto. Among them were Jacopo della Lana, whose commentary dates to c. 1321–24, and Pietro Alighieri, Dante's son, whose commentary dates to 1340–42. See Benkard, *Das literarische*, pp. 35–40. Another anonymous author wrote a famous commentary in 1333, for this see *L'ottimo commento* 1828, p. 188.



Fig. I.1: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, Watercolour, 36.8 x 47 cm, Andrew Lloyd Weber Collection.

ox or other bovine animal.²³ The nickname could thus mean 'ox-head' or, considered metaphorically, 'one who crushes the views of others'.²⁴ Concerning names, Villani believed 'Cimabue' to be a surname and 'Giovanni' to be Cimabue's first name. 'Giovanni Cimabue' operated symbolically for Renaissance writers as John the Baptist to Giotto's Christ, a prophet of painting who paved the way for his inheritor to bring art back to its classical glory.

For Villani, Vasari and others, artists' names, even their nicknames, were highly significant. The fact that Cimabue was known by his nickname—the meaning of which is still debated—indicates that he achieved renown in his lifetime, but little factual information about him survives. Cimabue's given name was Bencivieni (Cenni) di Peppo, or Benvenuto di Giuseppe, in modern Italian.²⁵ Only four known documents from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries mention Cimabue, and only one extant work is connected to one of these written sources. He is first noted in a Roman testament of 1272 as a witness for the transfer of Franciscan nuns to the Augustinian rule.²⁶ Three decades later, Cimabue is recorded in Pisa between September 2, 1301, and February 11, 1302, working on the mosaics in the apse of Pisa Cathedral.²⁷ According to a surviving contract

²³ One hypothesis suggests that in addition to being a painter, Cimabue worked with cattle and was a specialist in cutting off their horns. See Manca, 'Cenni di Peppo', 1–5.

²⁴ Gibbs, 'Cimabue', p. 45.

²⁵ For transcriptions of the documents related to Cimabue, see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 290–92.

²⁶ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 290.

²⁷ Here as in elsewhere in this book I give the dates according to the modern style as opposed to the Pisan calendar, which was approximately one year ahead of the standard one used elsewhere in Italy. On these documents see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 290–92.

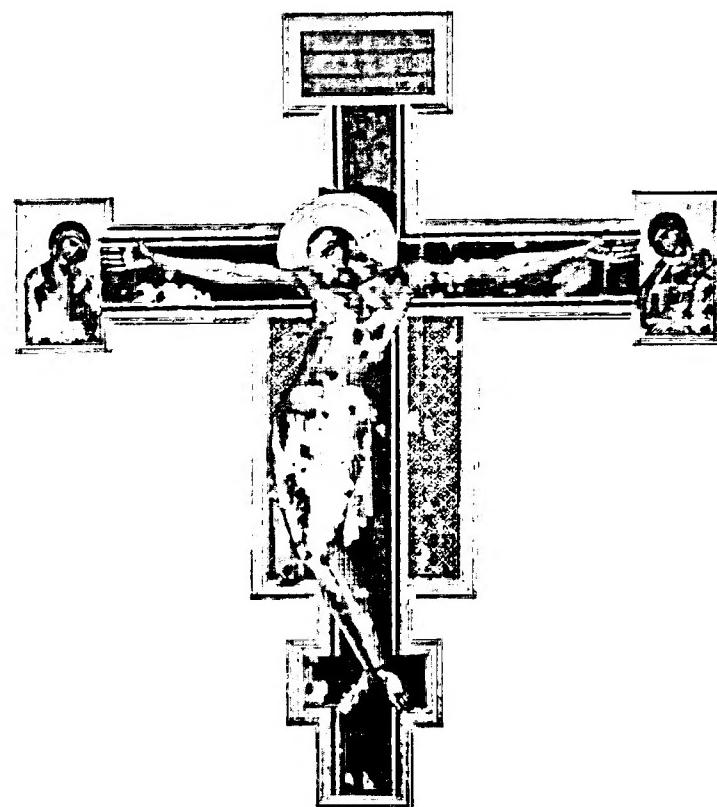


Fig. I.2: Cimabue, *Crucifix* (post 1966 flood), Tempera and gold on wood, 448 x 390 cm, Santa Croce, Florence.



Fig. I.3: Cimabue, *Saint John the Evangelist*, Mosaic, Pisa Cathedral.

dated November 5, 1301, Cimabue was hired to paint a now lost (or unexecuted) altarpiece for the hospital church of Santa Chiara in Pisa.²⁸ His death occurred before July 1302, for a testament of that date mentions that his heirs were by then residing in Fiesole.²⁹ While these documents reveal only a limited picture of his forty-year career, they do offer clues as to the powerful patrons and religious institutions for whom Cimabue worked.

Lacking written evidence, art historians have attempted to reconstruct Cimabue's *œuvre* using his single documented work, the mosaic figure of John the Evangelist in Pisa cathedral, as a touchstone (Fig. I.2). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars built upon the traditional attributions from Vasari and others, employing methods of connoisseurship to ascribe further works to him. The inherent subjectivity of stylistic connoisseurship, particularly when one relies on photographs to compare painted panels to murals to mosaics, has made scholarly consensus on Cimabue's body of work elusive. The last significant monograph on the artist, published in 1998 by Luciano Bellosi, attempted to catalogue his securely attributed works. Bellosi's careful and mostly convincing list includes only thirteen entries.³⁰ The best known and most widely accepted of the works Bellosi cites are, in addition to the documented Pisa mosaic, Cimabue's monumental crosses made for the churches of San Domenico in Arezzo and Santa Croce in Florence, his majestic panels of the Virgin and Child, one from the church of San Francesco in Pisa, now in the Louvre, and another from the church of Santa Trinita in Florence, now in the Uffizi, and the murals he painted in the Upper and Lower Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. A small panel discovered in 1999 depicting the Virgin and Child Enthroned and now in the National Gallery, London, has been added to Bellosi's list. It once formed part of a larger work that included a panel of the same size depicting the Flagellation,

²⁸ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 290.

²⁹ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 292.

³⁰ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 273–83.

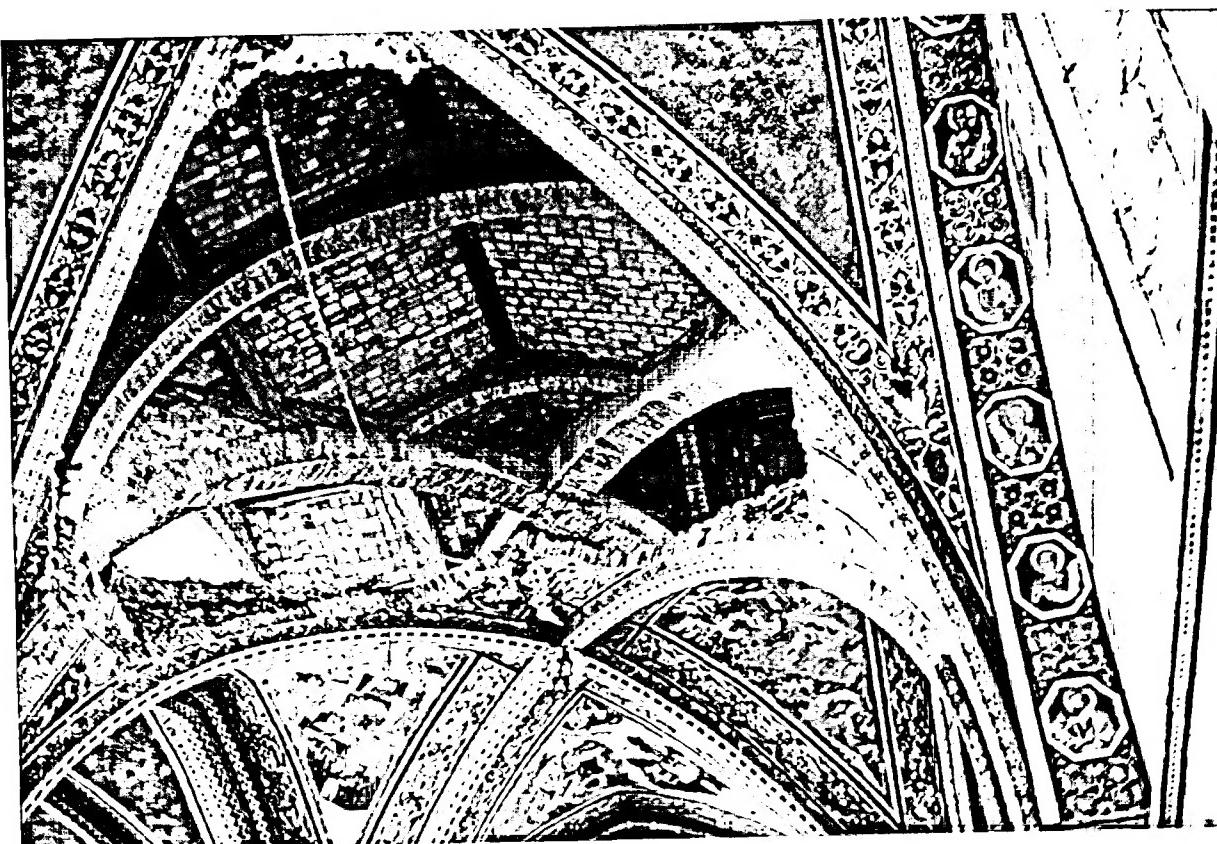


Fig. I.4: Collapsed Vault following 1997 earthquake, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

now in the Frick Collection. All these works share distinctive aspects of Cimabue's visual language as seen in his John the Evangelist mosaic, such as the wide, open eyes of the figures and the subtle gradation of flesh tones rendered through soft shadows rather than solid lines.

Aside from the fact that Cimabue's accepted output is small, some of his most celebrated works have been nearly ruined due to man-made or natural disasters. As will be discussed in depth in Chapter 1, Cimabue's murals in the Upper Church at Assisi were painted using heavy lead white pigments, which have corroded and darkened, significantly obscuring the compositions. In November of 1966, Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix, the subject of Chapter 5, was all but destroyed in the floods that ravaged Florence; despite the best of attempts of restorers, large painted areas of Christ's face and body were permanently lost (Fig. I.3). The cross became an enduring symbol of the devastation of the city. The Umbrian earthquake that shook Assisi in 1997 caused part of Cimabue's crossing vault in the Upper Church at Assisi to collapse, irreparably destroying one of its webs (Fig. I.4). The fragmentary state of his small œuvre of paintings, combined with the paucity of surviving documents, has surely contributed to the lack of contemporary Cimabue studies.

While most scholars agree that the abovementioned artworks are by Cimabue, their dating and chronology remain much debated. Bellosi, for example, insisted both in his 1998 monograph and a more recent article that Cimabue's murals in the Upper Church at Assisi were painted during the pontificate of the Franciscan Pope Nicholas IV (1288–92), while others, citing visual evidence from the cycle, believe they date to the era of Nicholas III (1277–80), a pope who was also very close to the Order.³¹ Because hard evidence for dating nearly all of Cimabue's works is scant, there is a tendency in Cimabue studies to insert works in a timeline that reflects a Renaissance notion of teleological stylistic development. His more 'naturalistic' paintings, or those that employ seemingly

³¹ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 155; Bellosi, 'Nicolaus IV fieri precepit', pp. 2–14. For a summary of the the prevailing view of the dating, see Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 84.

and for a more recent discussion of the various arguments, see Bartalini, 'Postfazione', p. 357–82.

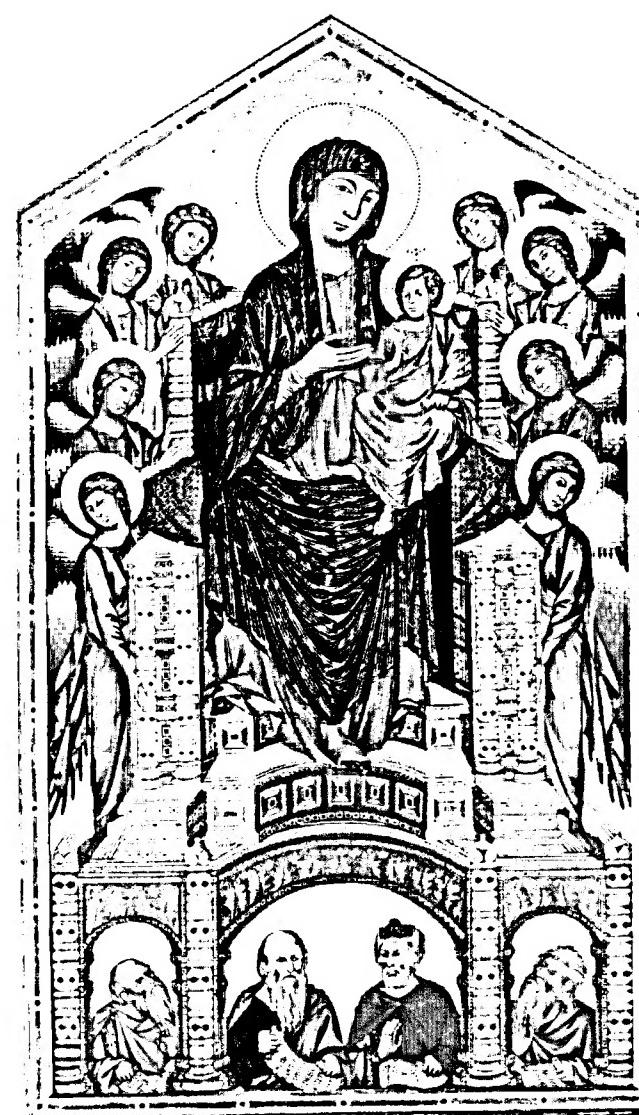


Fig. I.5: Cimabue, *Virgin and Child in Majesty*, Tempera and gold on wood, 385 x 223 cm, Uffizi, Florence, Inv.8343.



Fig. I.6: Cimabue, *Virgin and Child in Majesty*, Tempera and gold on wood, 424 x 276 cm, Louvre, Paris.

more advanced perspectival techniques, for example, are placed later in that chronology.³² This line of thinking dominates debates about the Santa Trinita Madonna (Fig. I.5). The enormous, frontally-positioned throne depicted in this gilded panel has been seen by some as a step forward from the diagonally-placed throne in Cimabue's San Francesco Madonna (Fig. I.6), a rationale for dating the Santa Trinita Madonna to the end of Cimabue's career.³³

Such approaches are problematic for several reasons. First, the concept of 'naturalism' is highly subjective and culturally specific, as underscored in several recent studies.³⁴ Furthermore, the use of perspectival effects in this period, by Cimabue and other artists too, often do not conform to concepts of stylistic evolution, as Gervase Rosser has shown.³⁵ Arguments based on visual

³² See Stubblebine, 'The Development', pp. 32–39. This approach informs even quite recent studies; see Polzer, 'Concerning the Chronology', p. 119.

³³ Bellosi places the Pisa Maestà at circa 1280 and the Santa Trinita Maestà at circa 1301; see Bellosi, Cimabue, pp. 102–13 and pp. 249–55, while Gibbs, 'Cimabue', argues the opposite

for these two. Gardner, 'The Louvre Stigmatization', p. 219, argues for an early fourteenth-century date for the Pisa Maestà.

³⁴ For the fluid notions of 'naturalism' see Guérin and Sapir, 'The Nature of Naturalism', pp. 5–9; Perkins, *Likeness of the King*, pp. 27–84, and Perkins, 'Likeness', pp. 15–28.

³⁵ Rosser, p. 488.

elements or style are sometimes countered in attempts to trace Cimabue's movements using other evidence. For example, many date Cimabue's *San Francesco Madonna* to the 1280s, based on stylistic comparisons to his works at Assisi. However, because he is documented in Pisa in the early fourteenth century, others believe he painted his *Pisan Maestà* at that time, while research on the building of the church for which the panel was destined has prompted scholars to offer a date as early as 1265.³⁶ Because of these inherent difficulties, it is not my aim to establish a precise chronology for Cimabue's works in this book. My investigation of the projects he executed for the Franciscans, however, does allow me to propose a rough timeline for those works that is reflected in the book's overall structure.

While Renaissance narratives inscribed Cimabue firmly into the canon of art history, they also bound him to persistent notions of periodization.³⁷ Caught in a liminal space of history between 'medieval' and 'Renaissance', he is considered both innovative in terms of the art that came before and conservative in comparison to the next generation. Thus, one goal of this study is to understand Cimabue's works apart from traditional views of stylistic change. No doubt late thirteenth-century artists were actively engaged in innovative projects reaching towards new artistic idioms, but we need to see this moment of 'renewal' or *renovatio* as a cultural product of its own time.³⁸ Because the majority of Cimabue's accepted works were made for Franciscan patrons, close examination of those works provides the gateway to a new understanding of how Cimabue was a creative catalyst for artistic changes in the period.

The Franciscans: A Constructed History

As the story goes, one day a rich young man from Assisi, Italy took a walk in the fields on the outskirts of town. He came upon the dilapidated church of San Damiano, went inside, and began to pray before a painted crucifix. Suddenly he heard a voice calling him by name, imploring him to 'repair my house'.³⁹ For the man, the future Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226), this divine call spurred his conversion from the spoiled son of a wealthy cloth merchant into a humble saint devoted to Christian poverty. Francis' holy metamorphosis culminated in the saint's physical embodiment of Christ himself, as he became marked with the stigmata, Christ's wounds. Francis then lived out the greater meaning of Christ's command to him to 'rebuild my church'. He gathered a group of followers who vowed together to form a new religious vocation with a *renovatio* or renewal of the church at large as its goal, enacted by emulating the poverty and itinerancy of the Apostles.⁴⁰

In observing their vow of poverty, the early friars refused to live, as had traditional monastics, in fixed communities supported by the income from property.⁴¹ They were not to touch money nor to own any property. The building of churches and the commissioning of art was therefore not part of the Order's early agenda. The friars did accept castoff churches, such as the Benedictine foundation of Santa Maria degli Angeli in the valley below Assisi, which became the first real centre of the movement. Nevertheless, it was not until after Francis' death that the Order actively participated in

³⁶ It has also been suggested that the Louvre *Madonna* was painted in conjunction with the restructuring of the church of San Francesco beginning in 1264. See Buresi et al., *Cimabue*, p. 234.

³⁷ For a revisionist view, see for example Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto*, pp. 1–6.

³⁸ I have thus deliberately framed my discussions away from matters of style, eschewing comparisons to Giotto or arguments about Cimabue's classicism, and I am also deliberately cautious in my use of the terms 'medieval' and 'Renaissance'.

³⁹ My retelling here is based on the life of Francis by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, which from 1266 was the official biography sanctioned by the Order. See Bonaventure, *LM* 2:1, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 535.

⁴⁰ On the theme of restoration in Francis' hagiography see Peters, 'Restoring the Church', pp. 213–36.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the revolutionary responses of groups such as the Dominicans and Franciscans to societal change in the thirteenth century, see Little, *Religious Poverty*.

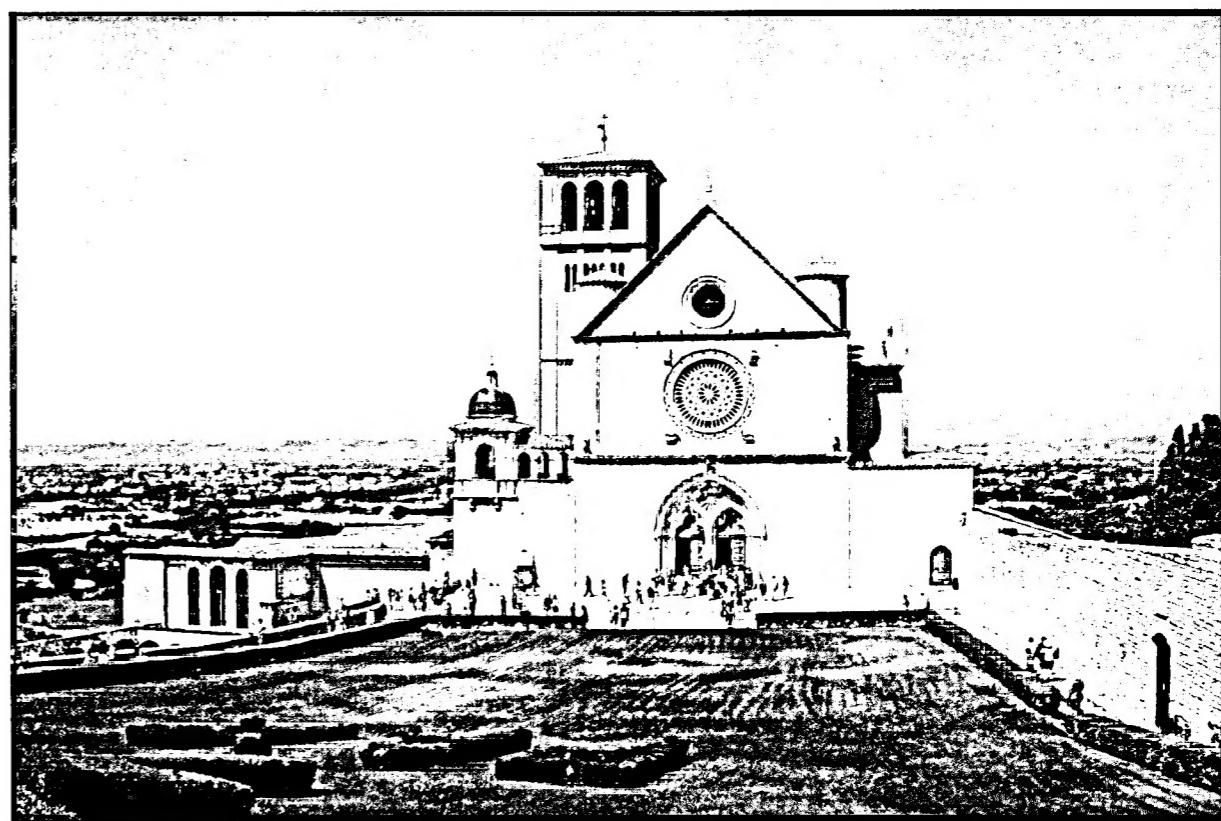


Fig. I.7: Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

the creation of major works of art and architecture. That change came swiftly; Francis died in 1226, and in 1228 pope Gregory IX laid the foundation stone for a new church in Assisi to house his body.⁴² In 1230, the same year that Francis' body was translated to the new Basilica, the same pope issued the bull *Quo elongati*, allowing the friars the use, but not ownership, of property and goods.⁴³ The concept of use without ownership was further clarified in 1245, when Pope Innocent IV proclaimed possession of all property used by the Franciscans.⁴⁴

To address the practical considerations involved in the friars' receipt of such items, systems were put in place that allowed them to receive goods and money through intermediaries. Such individuals were known as proctors, and were appointed by the Holy See or the cardinal protector of the Order.⁴⁵ These intermediaries who oversaw enforcement of the Order's regulations provided the friars with a means of using churches, convent buildings, liturgical objects, and other goods without disobeying the Franciscan Rule's interdict against property ownership. The Basilica of San Francesco and its Sacro Convento were thus technically the property of the pope. Established as the motherhouse of the Order under papal sponsorship, the Basilica became Italy's single most important centre of artistic patronage over the next century (Fig. I.7).

As the building of the lavish Basilica indicates, by the mid thirteenth century the Order had grown from the small band of brothers established by Francis to a large international religious and political machine, with members playing key roles in the universities and in Church hierarchies.⁴⁶ To many, this rapid expansion was contrary to the ideals of Francis, and despite the attempts to distinguish between 'use' and 'ownership', controversies over the Franciscans' observance of poverty would

⁴² Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 3.

⁴³ BF I, ed. Sbaralea, pp. 68–70.

⁴⁴ BF I, ed. Sbaralea, pp. 400–02.

⁴⁵ See discussion in Bourdúa, *The Franciscans*, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁶ On the Franciscans and the universities see Moorman, pp. 123–39.

escalate throughout the late thirteenth century.⁴⁷ The friars sought to address some of the issues regarding ideals of poverty, including the use of art and architecture, under the leadership of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217–74), who served as Minister General of the Order from 1257 to 1274.⁴⁸ In a 1257 letter to the provincial ministers and custodians of the Order, Bonaventure defended the building of large churches and convents, citing the high cost of land within cities as a reason for building tall buildings, and defending the use of stone due to the risk of fire.⁴⁹ At the General Chapter meeting of the Order at Narbonne in 1260, the friars first outlined specific regulations governing the building and decoration of their churches.⁵⁰ Edifices and art objects were allowed, but were to be governed by principles of moderation; superfluous decorations and overly luxurious items used to celebrate mass were to be avoided. Costly details such as vaulting and stained glass were to be kept only to the immediate area of the high altar, and here only Christ on the cross, the Virgin, Mary, John, and saints Francis and Anthony could be depicted. As several scholars have pointed out, the Narbonne Constitutions, as well as similar regulations passed by the Order in 1279 and 1292, were observed selectively, and sometimes blatantly disregarded, and failed to quell the tensions within the order that came to a head in the early decades of the fourteenth century.⁵¹ Fueled also by the interests of papal, ecclesiastical, and private patrons, the Franciscans continued to deploy elaborate works of art and to employ the leading artists of the day in their efforts to promote the Order.

By the mid thirteenth century—the approximate start of Cimabue's career—the Franciscans were reaching the heights of their popularity, but new challenges and crises accompanied that success. The Order's ideal of poverty was criticized from outside its ranks; a Master of Paris, William of St Amour, declared c. 1255 that Christ had not mandated total renunciation of goods, and that the mendicants in fact were representatives of the Antichrist.⁵² Despite the papal condemnation of William's writings, similar ideas were expressed in 1269 by Gerard of Abbeville, who criticized the whole notion of evangelical poverty. As indicated in William of St Amour's accusations, the Antichrist was also a very real concern in this period; the Franciscans were caught up in the mid-century controversies surrounding the apocalyptic predictions of the Cistercian monk Joachim of Fiore (c. 1132–1202), who foretold that the church would ultimately be saved from the Antichrist by two new religious orders living in apostolic poverty. The Franciscans and Dominicans had seen themselves as those prophesized orders, but when Joachim's writings were officially condemned by the pope, John of Parma, then-Minister General of the Franciscans, was forced to step down due to his Joachite views.⁵³ Members of the secular clergy also opposed the Franciscans and the other mendicant orders, complaining that the friars had no place within the established structure of the church. The Franciscans faced increased competition with those other mendicant orders; their primary rivals were the Dominicans, founded in the early thirteenth century with similar goals of itinerancy, poverty, and preaching.

The works the Franciscans commissioned from Cimabue in the last three or so decades of the

⁴⁷ The conflict used to be described as between two camps, the 'Spirituals' versus the 'Conventuals', but as David Burr and others have shown, the factions within the order were much more complex, particularly in the mid to late thirteenth century. For the conflicts within the Order at the time of Cimabue's work for the Franciscans, see Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, pp. 43–66.

⁴⁸ See Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, pp. 32–37, who cautions, however, against the traditional view that Bonaventure intentionally tried to heal the rifts over poverty already evident in the Order.

⁴⁹ Bonaventure, 'Opusculum XIX, Epistolae officiales', I (1257), in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 8, pp. 341–42; 'Determinations

quaestionum circa regulam fratrum minorium', pars I, qu. VI, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8, pp. 341–42.

⁵⁰ For these regulations see Bihl, 'Statuta generalia', and for English translations of the Narbonne constitutions and statutes, see Bonaventure, *Writings*, pp. 71–144. See also discussions in Bourdua, *Franciscan Patronage*, pp. 23–24; Cobianchi, 'Franciscan Legislation', pp. 107–19, and Gardner, 'Aedificia iam in regales', pp. 307–30.

⁵¹ See Bourdua, *Franciscan Patronage*, p. 24; Cooper and Robson, 'A Great Sumptuousness', pp. 656–62.

⁵² Moorman, *A History*, pp. 127–29.

⁵³ The Joachite controversy is too complicated to treat sufficiently here; for an introduction see Moorman, *A History*, pp. 114–16 and Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, pp. 29–31.

thirteenth century thus need to be seen against the backdrop of this historical moment, when the Franciscans' heightened prestige, coupled with this increased criticism, prompted a rebranding of the Order. Bonaventure was again a key agent in this process, and his influence can be seen in Cimabue's works at Assisi and elsewhere. Bonaventure's writings shaped the friars' corporate identity and devotional practices for years to come. In 1260, the Order commissioned him to write a new biography of Saint Francis, which was published in 1263 and was declared the only official life of the saint in 1266. As scholars have noted, the adaptations Bonaventure made to the earlier biography written by Thomas of Celano constructed a new history of Francis, one that emphasized his unattainable holiness and complete conformity to Christ.⁵⁴ The *Legenda maior* of Bonaventure crystallized the notion of Francis' life paralleling that of Christ; modern historians thus often characterize this presentation of Francis as an '*alter Christus*'.⁵⁵ Close comparisons between the *vita*e of Francis and Christ became increasingly evident in the painted images of the saint at Assisi and elsewhere. Bonaventure's *Apologia pauperum* or *In Defense of the Mendicants* of 1269–70 was a response to the charges of Gerard of Abbeville; in this text Bonaventure declared the biblical justification for the friars' devotion to poverty.⁵⁶ Bonaventure also wrote theological guides for the friars and tracts on meditation, including the *Itinerarium mentis in deum* or *Mind's Journey into God* and the *Lignum vitae* or *Tree of Life*, that shaped affective practices of contemplation that became a hallmark of Franciscan spirituality.⁵⁷ Although he is one of many Franciscan voices from the thirteenth century cited in this book, Bonaventure's works are a constant touchstone because they evince Franciscan spirituality in a general sense, but more importantly, because they speak precisely to concerns current in the Order at the time Cimabue was working.

It is crucial to clarify how I will use the terms 'Franciscan spirituality' and 'Franciscan art' in this study. As scholars have repeatedly noted, the Franciscans had much in common with other mendicant orders, including their values of poverty, practices of preaching, and ambitions of renewal. It has also been argued that the devotional practices centred on the emotions have been unduly characterized as 'Franciscan'. The modes of experiential meditation exemplified by the often-cited Franciscan text, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* of the early fourteenth century, have their roots outside the Order, in the twelfth-century writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, for example.⁵⁸ There are many religious practices that the Franciscans shared with other orders, and the same can be said for qualities in the works of art they commissioned. The Franciscan invocation of the Virgin Mary as their special advocate, for example, was also asserted by the Dominicans, and innovative images of her were commissioned from major artists by both Orders.

In recent years, however, art historians have noted important distinctions that help to more precisely define the artistic interests of particular orders. Joanna Cannon's thorough research into the patronage of the Dominican Order, for example, has established that unlike the Franciscans, the Dominicans did not immediately centre their cult on their founder, and that narrative images were not favored in Dominican contexts as they were for the Franciscans.⁵⁹ Similar differences between the art patronage of the two orders were illuminated in a 2014 exhibition at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, where curator Trinita Kennedy underscored that the early

⁵⁴ See the introduction to Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey*, ed. Cousins, pp. 37–46.

⁵⁵ The term '*alter Christus*', first coined in the twentieth century and now in common usage among historians, was in fact never applied to Francis historically. For a helpful analysis of this term and of the thirteenth and fourteenth century theological traditions aligning Christ and Francis, see Renner, pp. 31–32.

⁵⁶ Bonaventure, *Defense of the Mendicants*, introduction.

⁵⁷ Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey*, ed. Cousins, pp. 18–37.

⁵⁸ The dating of the *Meditationes* continues to be much

debated; for a summary of the arguments and the most convincing, recent case made for an early fourteenth century date see Falvay and Tóth, 'New Light', and 'L'autore'. For a nuanced view of Franciscan devotion see Bynum, 'Franciscan Spirituality', pp. 195–97; see also the recent questioning of Franciscan affect in McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, introduction, and for similar revisionist ideas as applied to the history of Franciscan art see Chatterjee, 'Francis' Secret Stigmata', pp. 40–42, and Chatterjee, *The Living Icon*, introduction.

⁵⁹ Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 357–59; see also Cannon, 'Dominic and the Brothers', pp. 7–25.

and lasting emphasis on Francis himself helped to establish and cement corporate identity for the Franciscans.⁶⁰ While devotion to the Virgin and affective meditation will emerge as key themes in this study, it is the distinctly Franciscan interest in promoting Francis himself, and particularly the new version of Francis constructed in Bonaventure's biography, that underpins many of the novelties in Cimabue's works.

Purposes, Patrons, and Shared Agency

In constructing a new history of Francis and thus of the Order he founded, the Franciscans of the late thirteenth century commissioned works of art with multiple functions and diverse audiences in mind. Some scholars have described the Franciscan use of art in this period as akin to propaganda; Dieter Blume even suggested that a precise programme of images was planned and disseminated from the mother house at Assisi, to be copied in Franciscan churches elsewhere.⁶¹ While the Franciscans certainly used art to advertise the saint and thus their Order, studies by Louise Bourdúa and others have shown that Franciscan artistic patronage varied considerably by region.⁶² Works of art were of course also tools of religious devotion as well as instruments of marketing. Painted crosses like the one Francis knelt before might aid personal prayer, and could serve as focal points for a crowd gathered to hear mass in a church. Narrative images painted on the walls of churches certainly served as advertisements for the Order, but the Franciscans also commissioned small-scale narrative painted diptychs and triptychs that could facilitate personal meditation on and visualization of Christ's life, a devotional exercise the Franciscans promoted heavily.⁶³

Bonaventure, along with other writers of the thirteenth century, cautioned against idolatry but advocated the use of images as tools in the meditative process. Bonaventure outlined steps a devotee could take to move mentally towards experiencing God in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. His basic principle of ascent to God derives from the fourth-century *De Genesi ad literaram* of Saint Augustine, in which three stages of vision leading to the divine are described: the first and lowest, corporeal vision, is the sight of the eyes; the second, spiritual vision, is the vision of things stored in the memory or imagined in the mind's eye; and finally there is intellectual vision, the image-less vision of the divine.⁶⁴ In Bonaventure's adaptation of Augustine's schema, the corporeal image, because it contained vestiges, or traces, of the divine, was crucial to the first step, leading to an understanding and experience of the true object of devotion, God himself. As Lynn Ransom has pointed out, however, for the Franciscans, images were not simply props used to facilitate this process, but could engage viewers actively 'in a process of realization and redemption'.⁶⁵ I shall return to this point several times later in this study, as I argue that some of Cimabue's Franciscan works demand participation from viewers, enabling their personal agency within the process of redemptive vision Bonaventure prescribes.

My examination of the intersection of the histories of Cimabue and the Franciscans therefore calls for an expanded view of traditional concepts of patronage and the agency of the viewer. Like many scholars, I retain the word 'patronage' for convenience in this study, but in fact what we know about artistic commissions from this period fits uncomfortably with conventional usages of that term.⁶⁶ Modern concepts of patronage in art history, particularly as articulated by Jacob Burckhardt

⁶⁰ Kennedy, *Sanctity Pictured*, pp. 1–17.

⁶¹ See Blume, *Wandmalerei*.

⁶² Bourdúa, *Franciscan Patronage*, pp. 10–11.

⁶³ On the life of Christ as a focus of Franciscan meditation, see Flora, *Devout Belief*, introduction.

⁶⁴ The literature on Augustine's theories of vision in a late medieval context is vast; for an introduction in a classic study see Ringbom, 'Devotional Images', pp. 162–63.

⁶⁵ Ransom, 'The Eyes Have It', p. 192.

⁶⁶ For this term as it is applied and misapplied to medieval commissions see Flora, 'Patronage', pp. 207–18.

in the nineteenth century, often conformed to Renaissance notions of patronage. For Burckhardt, the Renaissance was patron-driven, fueled by the desires of powerful men who recognized the talent of important artists.⁶⁷ The works commissioned by Cimabue for the Franciscans have sometimes been seen as products of similarly top-down directives from patron to artist. It has been assumed, for example, that because the popes were the primary financial sponsors of the artistic projects in the Basilica at Assisi, they were the decision makers when it came to details of artistic commissions.⁶⁸ The recent monograph on the Basilica and the papacy by Donal Cooper and Janet Robson, however, argues that the friars in the Sacro Convento (the friary of the Franciscan motherhouse at Assisi) were instead the primary agents in determining the particulars of the church's decoration.⁶⁹ No documents survive pertaining to the actual contracting of artists at Assisi, so it is difficult to say with certainty who was involved in planning the iconographic programme. Given the complicated theological ideas expressed in many of Cimabue's works, we have to imagine that the production of those works involved a protracted dialogue between the artist, the members of his workshop, and the friars themselves. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Cimabue and other artists like him were given considerable freedom, and were therefore capable themselves of engaging with and depicting sophisticated intellectual and spiritual ideas.⁷⁰

I would like to suggest that the idea of agency in the making and meaning of works of art be expanded here to include the viewers who would have stood before them. As will be explored further throughout the book, the works Cimabue executed for the Franciscans often reveal keen considerations as to their function and reception. The Franciscans, like Cimabue himself, were sharply attuned to the role the art they paid for would play in the promotion and practices of the Order. Although none of the works considered in this study can be linked with certainty to donations from the laity, the financial support of laypeople was of course increasingly important in the art projects sponsored by the Franciscans in this period.⁷¹ We can therefore consider Cimabue, the original viewers, the friars, as well as papal and ecclesiastical authorities, as shared agents in these works of art.

It may have been through his connections with papal patrons, however, that Cimabue first came to work for the Franciscans. We have very little information as to the early years of his career, but before he worked for the Franciscans he seems to have worked for their rivals, the Dominicans. Cimabue painted a crucifix made for the church of San Domenico in Arezzo (Fig. I.8) generally thought to date to the 1260s.⁷² The first documentary reference to Cimabue also points to a Dominican connection. In 1272, Cimabue is cited in Rome as a witness to the transfer of a group of Franciscan nuns to the care of the Dominicans at Sant'Andrea delle Fratte.⁷³ The nuns, from a convent founded by the Franciscans on one of their many missions to the Levant, had fled to Rome from the military conflicts that then riddled the Byzantine Empire. Now to live under the Augustinian rule—as the Dominicans were in this period—the nuns were put under the administrative oversight of cardinal Ottobuono Fieschi, a great patron of the arts and the future, though short-lived, pope Adrian IV (1276).⁷⁴ Cimabue is the only artist listed among the other witnesses; the remainder were friars or ecclesiastical representatives. Why he served in this capacity is a mystery, but because he is called 'Cimabue, painter from Florence' in the document, the implication is that he was present

⁶⁷ Burckhardt, *Die Kultur*.

⁶⁸ See for example Brooke, *The Image of Francis*, p. 453.

⁶⁹ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 50–51.

⁷⁰ For similar thoughts as to the agency of artists amid new approaches to patronage see Strehlke, 'Giottus Pictor', pp. 460–65.

⁷¹ On this topic see for example Bruzelius, *Preaching, Building*, and Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 261–75.

⁷² See Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 59–60, and also Corsi, *Cimabue ad Arezzo*, pp. 24–25.

⁷³ For a transcription of this document, see Bellosi, Cimabue, p. 290.

⁷⁴ There are no further conclusive links between Cimabue and the cardinal, however. On Fieschi and his patronage of the arts see Gardner, *The Roman Crucible*, pp. 17–34, and Sisto, 'Chiese, conventi', 317–31.

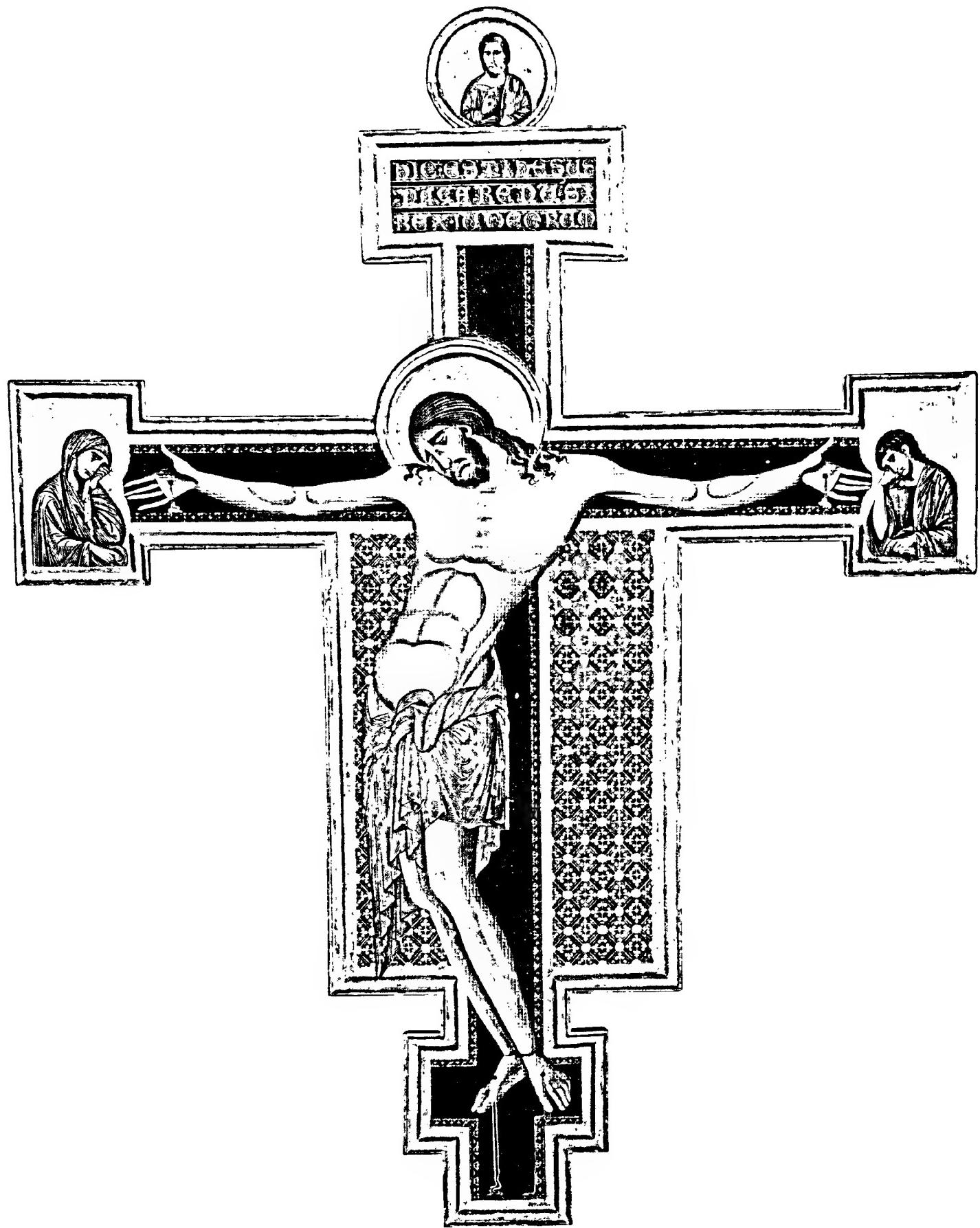


Fig. I.8: Cimabue, *Crucifix*, Tempera and gold on wood, 336 x 267 cm, San Domenico, Arezzo.

in the church working on an artistic commission, and thus a convenient witness, and a respected one at that. What is clear is that the time he spent in Rome was formative to his future career. Cimabue's knowledge of Roman art is apparent in his murals for the Basilica at Assisi, including the *all'antica* details of atlantes figures, vases, and acanthus leaves painted on the vaults and columns in the Upper Church (Fig. I.9). As will be explored further in Chapters 2 and 3, Cimabue's Assisi murals also show close knowledge of ancient and contemporary Roman monuments. It is thus reasonable to speculate that the commission to work at Assisi in the late 1270s came via his connection to Ottobuono Fieschi or to other links to the curia that Cimabue forged while in Rome. Cimabue was chosen for the Franciscans' most prestigious project to date: the decoration of the walls of the apse and transepts of the Upper Church in the Basilica of Saint Francis at Assisi. Surrounding the high altar, this was the most sacred liturgical locus of the motherhouse. It is here that my study of Cimabue and the Franciscans begins.

Part I: Transformations at Assisi

The first three chapters of this book concern Cimabue's murals in the Upper Church of the Basilica of Saint Francis Assisi. Likely painted c. 1277–80, the murals represent Cimabue's largest surviving body of work, but their poor condition has made scholars increasingly reluctant to study them. Yet the murals offer a timely opportunity to engage with current methodological directions in the history of art. The first of these is the renewed scholarly interest in materials and their symbolic and ideological significance. No scholar has offered an explanation as to why Cimabue chose lead white, rather than the typical lime white used in wall paintings, as the predominant pigment in his *a secco* murals in the Upper Church at Assisi, and that topic is the subject of Chapter 1. In it, I explore the Franciscan connections between optics, light, and the theology of Francis, offering a new interpretation of Cimabue's unorthodox use of materials.

My study then moves to considerations of the complex imagery of the murals themselves. Chapter 2 focuses on the mural cycles in the Upper Church transepts depicting the miracles and martyrdoms of Saints Peter and Paul and scenes from Saint John's Apocalypse. I discuss both the compositional and iconographic innovations that Cimabue employs in order to enhance the experiences of the viewer. My analysis is informed by recent art historical approaches to the senses and to somaesthetics, or the means by which art engages spectators on multiple levels via an awareness of space and the body. The visual strategies in the apse and transepts enhance the murals' iconographic emphasis on the friars' *vita mixta*. The Franciscans proclaimed that the ideal apostolic life involved the combined vocation of the *vita activa* or active life of preaching



Fig. I.9: Cimabue, Crossing Vault (detail), Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

and service, with the *vita contemplativa* or life of prayer and contemplation, themes addressed in Cimabue's murals.

In Chapter 3, I turn to an analysis of the decoration of the apse and crossing vault of the Upper Church. The apse's unique Marian mural cycle celebrates the Order's special relationship with the Virgin. I argue that Cimabue's murals here emphasize Mary's role in the Incarnation, appropriate to their position near the high altar. I am also the first scholar to connect the Marian imagery of the apse to Cimabue's unprecedented depiction of the Four Evangelists along with specific cityscapes in the vault above the high altar. The murals in the vault and apse together promote a Franciscan vision of the Incarnation that complemented the Eucharistic transformation that took place within this space.

Part II: Art, Memory and Experience

In the second half of the book, I consider the ways that Cimabue and the Franciscans used art to engender a sense of collective memory shared with viewers beyond the community in the Sacro Convento at Assisi. I begin with another Marian image that Cimabue painted at Assisi, a fresco, now heavily overpainted, depicting the Virgin and Child Enthroned on the wall of the north transept of the Lower Church, close to the tomb of Francis. Chapter 4 argues that Cimabue adapted the traditional iconography of the Maestà at Assisi to commemorate the origins of the Franciscan Order, fostering a collective memory that enhanced the Basilica's prestige as a pilgrimage site. The Assisi Maestà then inspired Cimabue's panel of the same subject made for the church of San Francesco in Pisa, as well as the small panel of the same subject now in the National Gallery in London. The repetition of the unique Marian iconography of the Assisi Madonna reflects the Order's efforts to create a recognizably Franciscan version of this popular image type, promoting their close relationship to the mother of Christ.

Chapter 5 turns to Cimabue's version of another popular type of monumental image: his crucifix made for the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence. As noted above, this work is most often cited in discussions of Cimabue's burgeoning 'Renaissance' naturalism. In this chapter, I present an alternate view of the stylistic change evinced in Cimabue's crucifix. The aesthetic novelties of his cross, including the innovation of the transparent loincloth, reflect Franciscan theological ideas about the Incarnation as a sign of God's nature, as well as the connection between Francis' devotion to Christ's humanity and his poverty. Probably originally designed to be placed atop the church's choir screen facing the large lay crowds that gathered for mass, the cross was a powerful tool for ocular communion as well as a striking symbol of the Florentine friars' ambitions.

The final chapter is devoted to Cimabue's role in the development of small-scale narrative painted works. The panel depicting the Virgin and Child Enthroned now in the National Gallery, London, once formed part of the same larger work as Cimabue's Flagellation, now in the Frick Collection. I argue that this larger work contained a series of narrative images of Christ's life designed for personal meditation. Cimabue was at the forefront of the creation of new types of narrative painting that, I contend, demanded sophisticated contemplative engagement on the part of their viewers. This work therefore points towards the ways that Cimabue and the Franciscans paved the way for new developments in devotional art in the next century.

The bulk of the surviving documentary evidence we have for Cimabue's career dates to the end of his life. At the turn of the fourteenth century, he worked on two Pisan commissions which are considered briefly in my Epilogue. Although neither is directly connected to the Franciscans, the contracts for these projects allow us to think about Cimabue's working relationships with his patrons in a broader sense. A brief look at Cimabue's commission for the apse mosaic in Pisa Cathedral

points to collaborative artistic practices, and to Cimabue's expertise in mosaic techniques, for which we find corroborating visual evidence in his prior work for the Franciscans. An agreement for a now-lost altarpiece for the hospital church of Santa Chiara in Pisa, an institution established by the Franciscans but later run by Augustinians, underscores several of the larger themes raised throughout this study. Long recognized by art historians because it contains the first written use of the word 'predella' in a contract for a work of art, the commission document also allows us to revisit some of the questions of innovation and shared agency raised in this book. For now, however, we must begin where the process of transformation began for Francis: Assisi.



CHAPTER 1

New Light on Cimabue's White

Among the works praised in Vasari's *Vite* are the murals Cimabue painted in the apse and transepts of the Upper Basilica of Saint Francis at Assisi, likely executed between 1277–80. Depicting the Apocalypse, the life of the Virgin Mary, the Four Evangelists, and the Apostles, Cimabue's murals are, unfortunately, in poor condition (Fig. 1.1). They had already deteriorated by the time Vasari saw them in 1563; in his 1568 edition of the *Vite* he described them as 'consumed by time and dust'.¹ In fact, however, Cimabue's working methods were the primary cause of the murals' instability.² Painting mostly *a secco*, rather than in *buon fresco*, he made liberal use of lead white pigment, formed from lead carbonate, which later corroded, darkening and obscuring his compositions (Fig. 1.2).³ The chemically altered lead white produced an almost complete chromatic reversal, leading scholars to resort to photographic negatives in attempts to understand the modeling and chiaroscuro of Cimabue's paintings (Fig. 1.3).⁴

There has been no investigation into why Cimabue used so much ill-fated lead white.⁵ His employment of lead white in itself was nothing new, but his heavy reliance on it for wall painting was distinctive. Painters of Cimabue's generation most often used the pigment on panels or in manuscript illumination, and in fact artists' treatises warn against lead white, citing its potential to turn black when used on walls.⁶ Either ignorant of this fact or choosing to ignore such advice, Cimabue applied lead white over large areas of his murals, layering it on the faces of his figures and their drapery as well as the architecture surrounding them. On the rare occasions when scholars discuss Cimabue's reliance on lead white at Assisi, it is seen as a sign of his experimental genius, compared for example to Leonardo da Vinci's later use of unstable pigments in his likewise ruined Last Supper.⁷ This view typifies the tendency to frame studies of Cimabue's art within

1 Although he wrongly attributes some of the nave murals to Cimabue, Vasari praises the cycle as a '... truly great work, so richly and finely executed, [which] must have astounded the world in those times, in my opinion, especially since painting had been for so long obscured in such darkness, and as for me, when I saw the work again in 1563, it seemed extremely beautiful, considering how Cimabue was able to show forth so much light amid so many shadows. But of all these frescoes, it is worth mentioning that those on the vaults less damaged by dust and other accidents are much better preserved than the others', Vasari, *Lives*, trans. and ed. Bondinella, pp. 10–11.

2 Further damage was inflicted by the 1997 earthquake, including the loss of the Matthew web of Cimabue's famous Evangelists vault above the high altar and the cracking of portions of the Apocalypse scenes. On the earthquake and restoration efforts see Giuseppe Basile, *Il Restauro*.

3 On the oxidation of the murals see Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, pp. 3–7. On the chemical changes that lead to lead white's colour changes, see Lussier and Smith, 'A Review',

pp. 41–53, and Giovannoni, Matteini, and Moles, pp. 22–23 who note that the exact mechanism for the chemical alteration on a secco wall paintings is still not understood. In the case of true frescoes the changes seem to occur while the intonaco is still wet.

4 Negative photographs of the murals were published in Battisti, *Cimabue*, for example plate 27.

5 Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, p. 5, notes that the unusually large quantities of lead white at Assisi lead restorers to speculate that the friars must have had a large supply on hand in the sacristy, although no explanation is offered as to why.

6 On the use of lead white in manuscripts for example see Ricciardi and Beers, 'The Illuminators' Palette', p. 36. The late fourteenth century treatise on art making by Cennino Cennini warns of lead white, 'Although it is used on walls, guard yourself against it as much as you can because over a period of time it turns black', see Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85.

7 Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', p. 96.

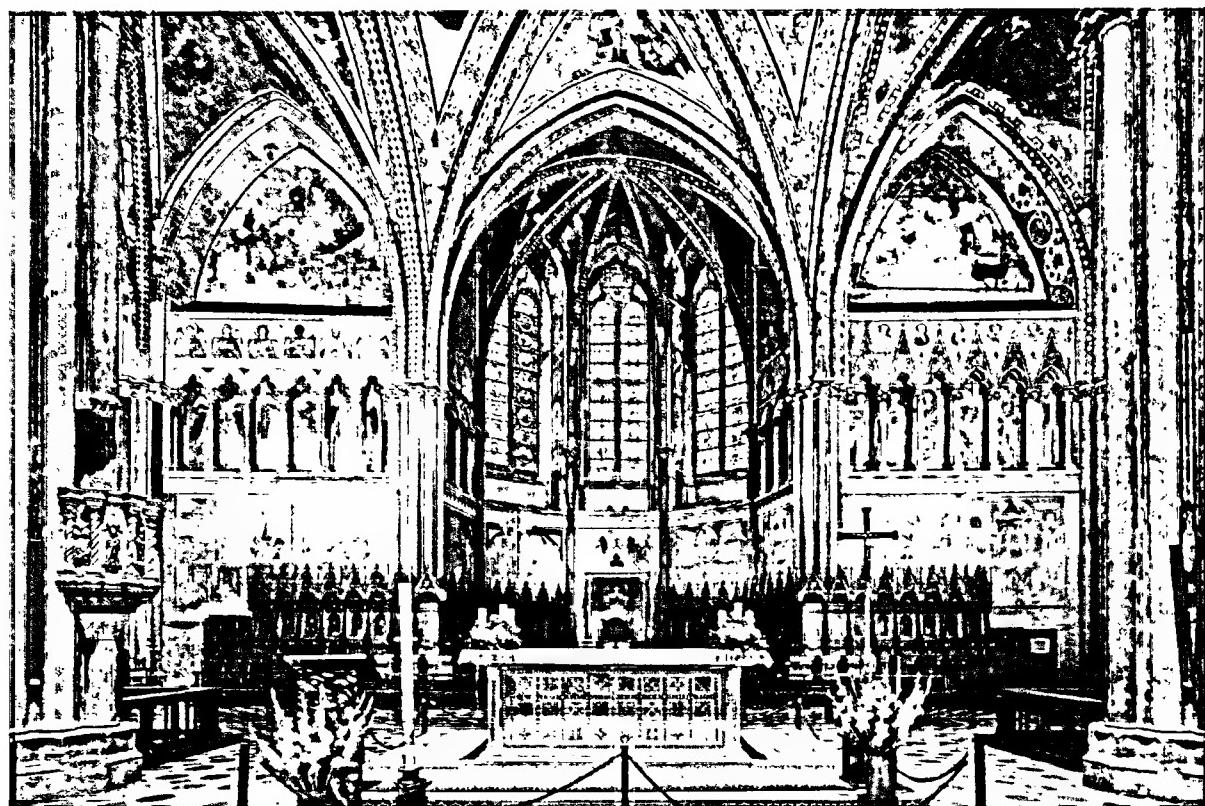


Fig. 1.1: View of Apse and Transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

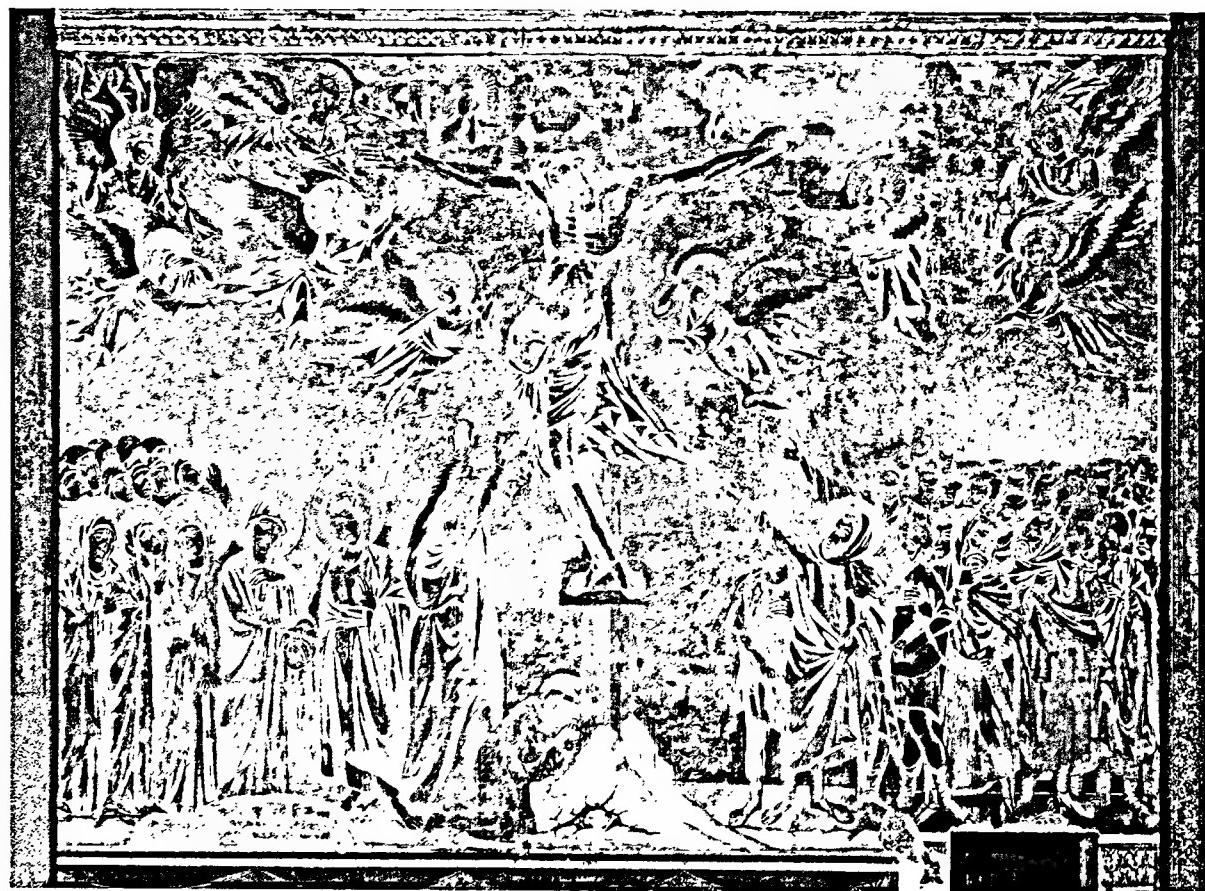


Fig. 1.2: Cimabue, Crucifixion, South Transept, Upper Church, Basilica of St Francis, Assisi.



Fig. 1.3: Cimabue, Crucifixion, South Transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi (negative photograph).

the teleological view of the Renaissance, where Cimabue figures as antecedent.⁸ While Cimabue's unusually liberal use of lead white indeed suggests that he was a technical innovator, his choice needs to be understood also within the ideological agendas of the Franciscans in the late thirteenth century. Considered in the context of Franciscan theology as well as natural philosophy, Cimabue's lead white signals the power of light and the mysteries of transformation. Understanding Cimabue's ruined murals in these terms provides a new way of thinking about his place in the wider phenomenon of artistic change in the period.

My consideration of Cimabue's use of lead white at Assisi is informed by a renewal of attention to materials within the humanities. The literature of this 'material turn' encompasses a wide variety of perspectives and definitions of 'materiality' and 'materialities'.⁹ My arguments here intersect with two avenues of thinking about the ways artists and patrons conceptualized materials. The first is the notion that materials were often chosen for other reasons than practical concerns such as availability or cost, and that artists and patrons used materials to shape meaning for viewers.¹⁰ I believe that Cimabue chose lead white because of its superiority as a bright white pigment, wishing, along with his patrons, to enhance the effects of light in the church. This choice went beyond the quest for beauty, however, as it carried symbolic and allegorical meanings for viewers.¹¹ The interest in optimizing the viewer's encounters with light, as I will explain further below, stems from the friars' knowledge of new theories on vision and the metaphysics of light as vehicles for

8 For example, Polzer, 'Cimabue Reconsidered', pp. 197–224.

9 For summaries of some recent approaches to materials see the essays in Christy Anderson, et al., *The Matter of Art*, and Kumler and Lakey, 'Res et significatio', pp. 1–17.

10 See for example the discussions in Lehmann, 'The Matter

of the Medium', pp. 21–41, and Lehmann, 'How Materials Make Meaning', pp. 6–27.

11 My approach here is akin to Thomas Raff's notion of an iconology of materials. See Raff, *Die Sprache*.

divine experience. Other scholars, especially Nancy M. Thompson and Stefania Gerevini, have noted the Franciscan interest in light, but I am the first to connect it to Cimabue's abundant use of lead white at Assisi.¹² I also contend that the Franciscan appropriation of the symbolism of light and the colour white was centred on the figure of Saint Francis. The Franciscans' celebration of Francis' sanctity, seen particularly in Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, was expressed emphatically in terms of the saint's fiery radiance. The intended aesthetic effects of lead white at Assisi therefore index broader theological concerns.

Secondly, this chapter is informed by the idea that the nature of materials and the processes involved in their making also influenced the ways that patrons and artists deployed them. Stones and metals were believed to have inherent properties that could affect one's health, for example, and could carry negative or positive connotations depending on their use. These materials could be agents of physical and spiritual power in themselves.¹³ Medieval exegetes also allegorized the processes of making or refining materials, particularly metals, as Herbert L. Kessler has highlighted.¹⁴ It was therefore important for authors of technical treatises on art such as Cennino Cennini, author of the late fourteenth century *Il Libro dell'Arte*, to note the particularities of materials when writing about their manufacture. Cennino is believed to have recorded historical techniques dating to the era of Giotto, and he is therefore a key resource for my arguments about the way Cimabue and the friars at Assisi understood lead white.¹⁵

As I will discuss further below, lead white occurred in nature, but more often was manufactured via recipes that transformed dark metal into white powder, a process Cennino describes as 'alchemical'. The Franciscans in the thirteenth century, especially the natural philosopher and friar Roger Bacon (c. 1220–c. 1292), were interested in the potential of alchemy and its role in Christian salvation. Ardently devoted to the Eucharist, the Franciscans sought to understand the nature of transubstantiation, a mystery that parallels alchemy's power to transform matter. In receiving the stigmata, Saint Francis himself had also experienced mystical alteration of matter in his own flesh, a process compared by his biographers to the refinement of metals. While many scholars have discussed the allegorical possibilities of luxury materials such as stained glass or gold, I instead argue that a common pigment like lead white could also carry metaphorical significance. As Spike Bucklow has pointed out, lead white was valued because it was a radically transformed substance: dull, dark lead turned into shining white powder.¹⁶ For the friars at Assisi, such a dramatic process amplified lead white's symbolic potential.

Connecting Cimabue's use of plentiful lead white at Assisi to the spiritual interests of the friars in the Sacro Convento must remain speculative on some level, for we have no surviving documents from the commission for Cimabue's murals. Based on the evidence from the few contracts from the period, however, we can be sure that the desired aesthetic effects and budgetary limits of the project would have been discussed.¹⁷ Lead white was among the least expensive and easiest pigments to procure, but so was the more commonly used white for walls, lime white, or *bianco di san Giovanni*.¹⁸ Thus, we cannot dismiss Cimabue's choice of abundant lead white as a merely practical decision or one connected directly to the bubbling tensions in the Order surrounding the

observance of Franciscan poverty, as both lead white and lime white were relatively affordable.¹⁹ We can imagine, however, that Cimabue's discussions with the friars over the complicated theological ideas expressed in the iconography of his murals may have also led to discussions of materials in terms of their ideological possibilities.

In what follows, I present evidence from the period pointing towards some of the allegorical and symbolic meanings that might have been considered in such conversations. I begin with a brief introduction to the architectural context of Cimabue's murals, and then turn to a discussion of what is known about his painting techniques. The chapter then describes lead white's intended visual effects, positing its connections to the symbolism of light central to Franciscan theology. In the final sections, discussions of the Franciscans, lead white, and alchemy offer theories as to the allegorical potential of lead white as transformative matter.

Cimabue's Murals at Assisi: Setting and Patronage

Saint Francis died in 1226, and less than two years later Pope Gregory IX laid the foundation stone for a basilica at Assisi that would become his final resting place. The structure of the basilica was completed by 1253, and the church was consecrated on May 10 of that year. It is a double church, meaning that the building consists of two stories superimposed, both corresponding to a Tau cross-shaped plan. In imitation of Roman basilicas, the church is oriented from east to west, and in the west end, three altar tables or *mensae* were set up, one in each of the transepts and another in the centre of the crossing. The high altar was dedicated to the birth of the Virgin Mary, and the south transept altar to Saint Michael and the angels, and the north transept to the Apostles. The central altar was designed for celebrating the papal liturgy, while masses for the Franciscan community were performed at the two altars in the transepts.²⁰

The papal throne and the three altar tables have survived, but some of the other liturgical elements in place prior to Cimabue's work in the apse are now missing. These include a beam that once divided the apse from the nave and served as a platform for large monumental panel paintings. The latest research suggests that a trio of large gilded panels once adorned this barrier. At its centre was a large crucifix by Giunta Pisano, painted in 1236 for Elias of Cortona, at that time Minister General of the Order. Two other large panels, perhaps also painted by Giunta, likely flanked the cross on either side. Early modern documents indicate that one of these depicted Saint Michael and the other the Pentecost, subjects that correspond to the altar dedications in the transepts. The trio of paintings perhaps resembled that depicted at Assisi in the fresco showing the Verification of the Stigmata from the famous cycle of the Life of Francis, painted c. 1290 (Fig. 1.4).²¹

Other than these three panels, the Upper Church remained largely devoid of figural decoration until the last quarter of the thirteenth century. A programme of stained glass windows, among the earliest in Italy, began to be installed in the apse and transepts in the 1260s. The campaign of mural painting was then begun in the north transept either in the late 1260s or early 1270s by a group of painters from France or the Rhineland. These artists started painting the upper walls of the north transept and main apse, but at an unknown date and for unknown reasons, the transept project was taken over by Cimabue.²² The most plausible dates for his work are 1277–80, during

¹² See Thompson, 'The Franciscans and Stained Glass', pp. 23–44; Gerevini, 'Sicut Crystallus Quando Est', pp. 255–83.

¹³ For example, see the arguments regarding the potential symbolism of mural painting techniques in Bokody, 'Mural Painting', pp. 136–51, as well as the discussions of frescoes and material potency in Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences*, chapter 3.

¹⁴ Kessler, 'The Eloquence of Silver', pp. 49–64, and Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, chapter 2.

¹⁵ On the purpose and history of Cennino's treatise see the introduction by Broecke in Cennino, pp. 1–17.

¹⁶ Bucklow, 'Lead White's Mysteries', pp. 141–59; Bucklow, *The Riddle of the Image*, pp. 11–41.

¹⁷ A contract (for which no surviving work has been identified) between Cimabue and the Franciscans at the hospital of Santa Chiara in Pisa, dated 1302, specifies the use of pure gold and denotes salary terms negotiated with a friar. The document is transcribed in Bellosi, pp. 290–91. See Epilogue for further discussion.

¹⁸ On the cost of white, see Bucklow, 'The Trade in Colours', pp. 64–65.

¹⁹ The basilica at Assisi, where precious pigments were used along with the less expensive whites, perhaps prompted some of the Franciscan legislation enacted by the Order at Narbonne in 1260. The Narbonne statutes may have been a response to the installment of costly stained glass at Assisi. For a discussion of the Franciscan legislation concerning art and poverty, see Cobianchi, 'Franciscan Legislation', pp. 107–19. On the Franciscans' choices of materials as reflective

of concerns over cost, see also Gerevini, 'Sicut Crystallus', pp. 255–83. On the choice of frescoes as a possible concession to Franciscan poverty, see Cole, 'Arti povere, 1300–1650', p. 244.

²⁰ See Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 55–87.

²¹ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 63–69.

²² On the paintings that pre-date Cimabue's arrival at Assisi, see Binski, 'How Northern'.



Fig. 1.4: Saint Francis Master or Giotto: *Verification of the Stigmata*, Upper Church, Basilica of St Francis, Assisi.

the pontificate of Nicholas III, a member of the Orsini family whose coat of arms can be seen in the web of the crossing vault in Cimabue's famous depiction of 'Ytalia' as a Roman cityscape (Fig. 1.5).²³ Although Nicholas III may have been the official patron of the cycle, a local friar or a committee of friars in charge of the commission probably worked with Cimabue in planning the pictorial program for the transepts and apse. The names of these friars are lost, since no documents relating to the commission survive. Since Assisi was the headquarters of the Franciscan Order, and as such, an intellectual centre, it is no surprise that Cimabue's murals are full of complex theological allusions.²⁴

The images in the transept and apse at Assisi were also designed primarily for the viewership of the friars. The laity probably had access to these spaces from time to time, such as on feast days, but because a screen or beam originally separated the transept from the nave, this space was mainly the purview of an all-male, clerical audience.²⁵ The themes selected for Cimabue's murals mirror the dedications of the three altars, but also relate specifically to the religious vows taken by the friars (See Appendix 1 and 2). In the north transept, the altar was dedicated to the Apostles, and so depictions of the miracles and martyrdoms of Peter and Paul are shown, relevant to the friars' missionary goals and apostolic vows. Coinciding with the high altar's dedication to the birth of the Virgin Mary, whom Francis had named protector of the Order, the apse features scenes from her life, death, and Assumption. In the south transept, Cimabue painted scenes from the Apocalypse, a theme related to the dedication of the south altar to Saint Michael, the angel of judgment. As will be discussed further below, the Apocalypse was central to Franciscan ideas about the friars' ultimate mission in Christian eschatology. Cimabue also painted two large Crucifixion scenes on the rear-facing walls of the south and north transepts. Placed directly behind the altar blocks, these functioned effectively as altarpieces, to be viewed by the friars during Mass (Fig. 1.2). Thus the friars would have regarded the spaces Cimabue decorated as a sacred setting for the daily cycle of prayers and an expression of the larger spiritual concerns of the community.

²³ See Andaloro, 'Ancora una volta', pp. 143–82, for discussions of the cityscape of Rome.

²⁴ On the intellectual training of the Franciscans in the thirteenth century see Senocak, *The Poor and the Perfect*.

²⁵ There is still much uncertainty as to the original liturgical layout and furnishings of this space, so I want to be cautious in suggesting an 'exclusive' audience of the friars for the apse



Fig. 1.5: Cimabue, Evangelists' Vault, detail of 'Ytalia' Roman Cityscape, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

and transepts. The fundamental study remains Hueck, 'La Basilica Superiore', pp. 43–69, but her arguments have been countered by more recent proposals in Theis, 'Die Oberkirche', pp. 125–64, and Theis, 'Visualisierung des Unsichtbaren', pp. 53–61. Of interest on the subject of viewers' access is Benton, 'Perspective and the spectator's pattern', pp. 37–52, although some of her conclusions are contradicted by the more recent studies cited above.

Cimabue's Methods and Materials

While scholars have analyzed the iconographic themes of the transepts and apse, much less is known about Cimabue's painting techniques. Scientific studies have not been carried out consistently on the paintings, but those that have been done indicate that the murals' deterioration is due to a combination of technical and environmental factors. As previously mentioned, Cimabue painted mostly *a secco*, with pigments in tempera applied to dry plaster, or in *fresco-secco*, where the plaster was re-moistened with limewater as the painter worked.²⁶ Evidence for Cimabue's *fresco-secco* method can be seen in the patterns of plaster applied to the walls in *pontate*, wide horizontal bands corresponding to the level of the scaffolding erected to carry out the work.²⁷ The paintings are therefore properly termed murals, rather than frescoes. If true fresco had been used, the plaster pattern would instead indicate *giornate* corresponding to a day's worth of painting on a wet surface. Cimabue's *fresco-secco* technique was typical for his time; it was only in the late thirteenth century that artists in Rome and at Assisi began to work more consistently in true fresco.²⁸ The *a secco* technique or a combination of techniques were used at Assisi in the Lower Church by the Saint Francis Master (c. 1260), as well as by the artists from northern Europe who worked in the north transept before Cimabue's arrival.²⁹ The *fresco-secco* method created a less stable environment for the pigments than true or *buon fresco*, in which the pigments are applied to wet plaster, forming chemical bonds with it as they dry.

Cimabue's *a secco* technique is partly to blame for the murals' swift deterioration. Additionally, the thin preparatory layer of plaster supporting Cimabue's murals may have allowed for the penetration of moisture from the outside walls.³⁰ It has also been suggested that the Basilica's stone masonry surface was ill suited to the murals' preservation. Areas of the wall exposed by paint losses show efforts to make the surface more amenable to plaster; the wall surface was roughed up, and wood and cane were applied to areas between the stone to promote the adherence of the plaster.³¹ Different types of stone on which the paintings were executed may also have affected the stability of Cimabue's paintings. Subasio limestone was used for the walls where the most significant losses can be seen, while areas painted on travertine, such as the area in the south transept Crucifixion above the door to the sacristy, seem to be better preserved. According to conservation studies done in the 1950s, the plaster used had a low lime content, which resulted in less consistent adhesion of the pigments and might have contributed to losses in the murals as well.³²

The most significant changes in the appearance of Cimabue's murals, however, occurred because of his extensive use of lead white. Technical analyses of Cimabue's paintings at Assisi reveal that he employed typical mineral pigments based in metallic oxides of copper, iron, lead, as well as traces of gold and silver. Azurite was used for most of the blues.³³ His predominate white is lead white, which he deployed to create areas of pure whites and also layered over other colours to lighten or brighten them and increase their opacity. Cimabue's employment of lead white pigment is not unusual at all in itself. Documented at least as far back as 3000 BCE in ancient Ur, the material

²⁶ For an overview of the techniques used at Assisi by Cimabue, Giotto, and others see Meiss and Tintori, *The Painting of the Life*.

²⁷ On the sequence of painting in the apse and transept of the Upper Church see White and Zanardi, 'Cimabue and the Decorative Sequence', pp. 103–17. See also White, 'Cimabue and Assisi', pp. 355–83.

²⁸ Cimabue did not employ true fresco consistently in the Upper Church at Assisi, but his Madonna in the Lower Church, now marred by overzealous restorations done throughout the centuries, was executed in *buon fresco*. See Bonsanti, ed. *La Basilica*, pp. 426–29. On the shift from *fresco-secco* to true fresco techniques, see also Danti, *Le Pitture Murali*, and Tsuji, 'The Origins', of *Buon Fresco*', pp. 215–22.

²⁹ Oertel, 'Wandmalerei und Zeichnung in Italien', pp. 217–314; Meiss and Tintori, pp. 7–8.

³⁰ Meiss and Tintori, p. 8.

³¹ Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, p. 5.

³² Battisti, *Cimabue*, p. 38; p. 85, note 49.

³³ In 2007 pigment analysis of fragments of the vaults and the edges of the San Matteo bay were published, revealing that azurite was used with only traces of low-quality ultramarine or *cenere di lapis lazuli*. See Basile and Croci, *Restauri in San Francesco*. Similar findings were revealed in analyses of Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel. See the studies in Basile, ed., *Giotto nella Cappella degli Scrovegni*.

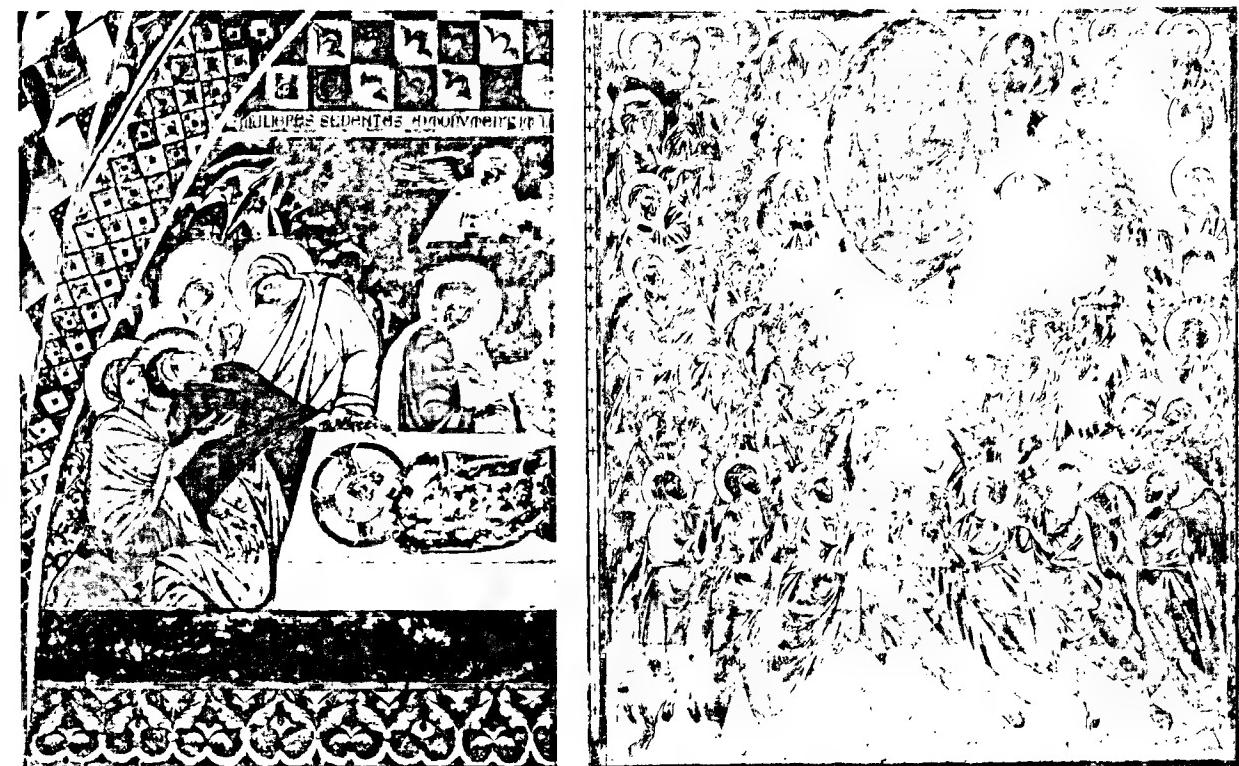


Fig. 1.6: Maestro di San Francesco, *Lamentation*, Lower Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Fig. 1.7: Cimabue, *Adoration of the Lamb*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

had been known and employed since antiquity.³⁴ By the late Middle Ages, its use in paintings, particularly on panels and in manuscript illumination, was common.³⁵ At Assisi, Cimabue would have observed the use of lead white in the paintings that preceded his work. The Saint Francis Master employed it in the Lower Church to embellish his murals narrating the Life of Saint Francis, as did the unknown artists from northern Europe who began the decoration in the north transept of the Upper Church.³⁶

Yet these other thirteenth century painters did not apply lead white abundantly and consistently throughout their compositions, as did Cimabue. The Saint Francis Master, for example, restricted his lead white to the highlights on certain figures (Fig. 1.6). Patches of darkened pigments on the torso of the dead Christ in the Lamentation scene show the artist's selective employment of lead white to brighten bodies and faces. These corroded areas stand in contrast to the other whites used by the Saint Francis Master, as seen in the still-white cloth underneath the body of Christ, executed using lime white, or *bianco di san giovanni*. Cimabue instead applied lead white in broad strokes throughout his compositions. Attesting to this abundant use of the pigment, large areas of dark greys and blacks can be seen on the architectural elements, such as the wall surrounding the Roman cityscape in the Mark vault (Fig. 1.5), as well as on the faces and clothing of his figures, as in the Apocalypse scene of the Adoration of the Lamb (Fig. 1.7). Chemical pigment analyses at Assisi, when compared to those done elsewhere on murals by other painters of his generation, confirm that Cimabue employed lead white in significantly greater quantities than his contemporaries.³⁷ The question, then, is why?

³⁴ Bucklow, 'Lead White's Mysteries', p. 142.

³⁵ Bucklow, 'Lead White's Mysteries', pp. 143–44.

³⁶ It should also be noted that lead white can oxidize not only to black but other colours as well, including brown and red, all of which can be seen in abundance at Assisi, although it can be difficult to discern where the pigments have oxidized and where surface pigment losses have revealed portions of red *sinopie* or underdrawing. See Tintori, 'Il bianco', pp. 437–

³⁷ See also Mignosi, 'Restauri alla basilica', pp. 217–23.

³⁸ Analyses done in the late 1970s reveal that Simone Martini also used lead white in the Lower Church in the early fourteenth century, but in different quantities and on different areas of his compositions than did Cimabue. See Tintori, 'Il bianco', p. 443. A few fragments from the 1997 earthquake were analyzed with similar results. See Basile and Croci, pp. 197–201.

To understand Cimabue's choices, it is useful to compare the two most commonly used white pigments from the period. The more popular and practical choice for white on walls was *bianco di san giovanni*, or Saint John's white, also sometimes called lime white.³⁸ Cennino Cennini describes the nature and use of both it and lead white in his *Libro dell'Arte* of c. 1400. He writes that *bianco di san giovanni* is a 'natural' pigment—derived from mined limestone. To produce the pigment, dried lime is reduced to powder and then immersed in water for eight days. Then it is dried again and formed into small cakes. Cennino says this white is essential for fresco painting.³⁹ In contrast, lead white, also known as *biacca*, is formed 'alchemically' according to Cennino.⁴⁰ Cennino does not give a recipe for the making of lead white, possibly because many recipes for it survive from earlier sources.⁴¹ Versions of the standard formula are found for example in the anonymous *Liber diversarum arciuum* of c. 1300 and the twelfth century treatise *On Divers Arts* written by the monk Theophilus. These describe how strips of lead were sprinkled with urine or vinegar, then enclosed in a wooden container and buried under horse dung. After a few weeks, a white crust forms on the metal, which is dried and then ground.⁴² Cennino affirms that *biacca* is good for painting on panel, but clearly warns that it can turn black when applied to walls.⁴³ Cennino claims to record historical painting techniques dating back to the time of Giotto, but because Cennino was writing more than a century after Cimabue painted his murals at Assisi, we cannot be sure that Cimabue was aware of lead white's potential to darken over time. Yet the fact that lead white was only used sparingly in the famous fresco cycle of the life of Francis in the Upper Church, painted a mere decade later, suggests that subsequent artists working at Assisi (including perhaps Giotto) may have learned from Cimabue's mistake.⁴⁴ Given lead white's longstanding use as a pigment in painting in the West, it is hard to imagine that Cimabue himself did not understand the risks. *Bianco di san giovanni* would have been the more obvious and practical choice for mural painting, just as the Saint Francis Master had done.

Cennino's description of the different natures of the two pigments helps to explain Cimabue's decision to use lead white, despite its known instability. Cennino calls *biacca* 'strong and fiery'.⁴⁵ As Laura Broecke notes, Cennino's meaning is somewhat unclear, given that lead was considered to be an earth rather than a fire element in medieval colour theory.⁴⁶ In my view, by using the words 'strong and fiery', Cennino aims to describe the high quality of the colour white lead produces. The making of *biacca* results in an opaque white pigment that is brighter and denser than the calcite-based *bianco di san giovanni*. What scientists today call the refractive index, or the quantified ability of a substance to bend light, is much higher for lead white than for *bianco di san giovanni*.⁴⁷ It is its derivation from lead that gives *biacca* its potential for splendor, much in the way that manufactured

38 Zanardi, 'Sulla natura', pp. 63–74, and Denninger, 'What is "Bianco di San Giovanni"', pp. 185–87.

39 Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 84.

40 Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85–86.

41 Recipes for lead white are found for example in Pliny, as well as in the medieval treatises *Liber Diversarum arciuum*, and the *Mappae clavicula*. See Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85, note 1, and on the manufacture of lead white see also Thompson, *The Materials*, pp. 92–94.

42 See Clarke, *Medieval Painters' Materials*, p. 111. Lead white can occur naturally in the form of cerussite, but it is rare. The name 'ceruse' is also used to describe manufactured lead white, which is the more commonly cited form in artists' handbooks. See Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Cerussite'.

43 Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85.

44 Although no technical studies have been able to determine the rate at which the murals darkened, Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, p. 5, proposed that Cimabue's murals must have taken a long time to darken, since other artists at Assisi

continued to use lead white as a pigment. But the artists who executed the Saint Francis cycle in the nave used lead white only to brighten the fictive columns between the scenes and did not use it extensively on drapery and for flesh tones as did Cimabue. See Basile, *I Colour di Giotto*.

45 '... questa biacha e forte fochora', Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85.

46 Broecke notes that Cennino may be making a distinction between *bianco di san giovanni* and *biacca* in terms of how each reacts to water; the idea may be that lead white, unlike lime white, does not react when mixed with water and therefore has characteristics of a fire element. See Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85, note 2.

47 Bucklow notes that the high refractive index produces a 'high degree of light scattering within the mixture', see Bucklow, 'Lead White's Mysteries', p. 6. Refractive index, a concept developed in the early nineteenth century, refers to the ability and speed with which materials refract waves of light. See Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Refractive Index'. On the refractive indexes of *bianco di san giovanni* and lead white see Douma, 'Lime White', and 'Lead White'.



Fig. 1.8: Maestro della Croce, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, Tempera and gold on wood, 82 x 50.5 cm, Uffizi, Florence.

behind the figures (Fig. 1.9). Treatises on painting from the period most often recommend lead white for the addition of the *matizatura*, the placing of highlights to create the illusion of protrusions of form.⁵¹ As Paul Hills pointed out, in painting of the late thirteenth century, these strokes of opaque lead white do not blend with their surrounding colours; thus they can delineate form, but in their stark whiteness, they also represent light bouncing off of the forms on which they are painted.⁵² This use of white to stand in for colourless light concords with Aristotelian colour theory, well known to natural philosophers and to authors of treatises on art techniques in the thirteenth century, which

48 On the chemical composition of lead crystal and glass see Fiori and Vandinim, p. 151. It should be noted here that lead crystal was not manufactured until the seventeenth century, but the light reflecting properties of lead were nonetheless understood long before that. See MacLeod, 'Accident or Design?', pp. 776–803.

49 Ibn al-Haythum, known in Europe by his Latinized name Alhazen or Alhacen (965–c. 104) wrote a treatise on optics that was translated from Arabic into Latin as *De aspectibus* around the beginning of the thirteenth century. In his description of an experiment designed to show the refraction of an image, Alhacen instructs the reader to paint white lines on a wooden panel, recommending specifically the use of ceruse, or lead white. See Alhacen, *Alhacen on Refraction*, p. 275. As A. Mark

Smith notes, this specification was likely intended to help the experiment succeed, 'to make the white as brilliant and clear as possible', see Alhacen, *Alhacen on Refraction*, p. 371, note 100.

50 On the use of white lead paint in early panels for highlights see Hills, *The Light*, pp. 19–24.

51 Hills, *The Light*, p. 19, mentions that the verb *matizare*, or placing of lights, occurs in several treatises including the *De colouribus et mixtionibus* (found as an addendum to a twelfth century manuscript of the *Mappae clavicula* of the eighth or ninth century), the *Compendium artis picturæ* (twelfth or thirteenth century).

52 Hills, *The Light*, p. 25.

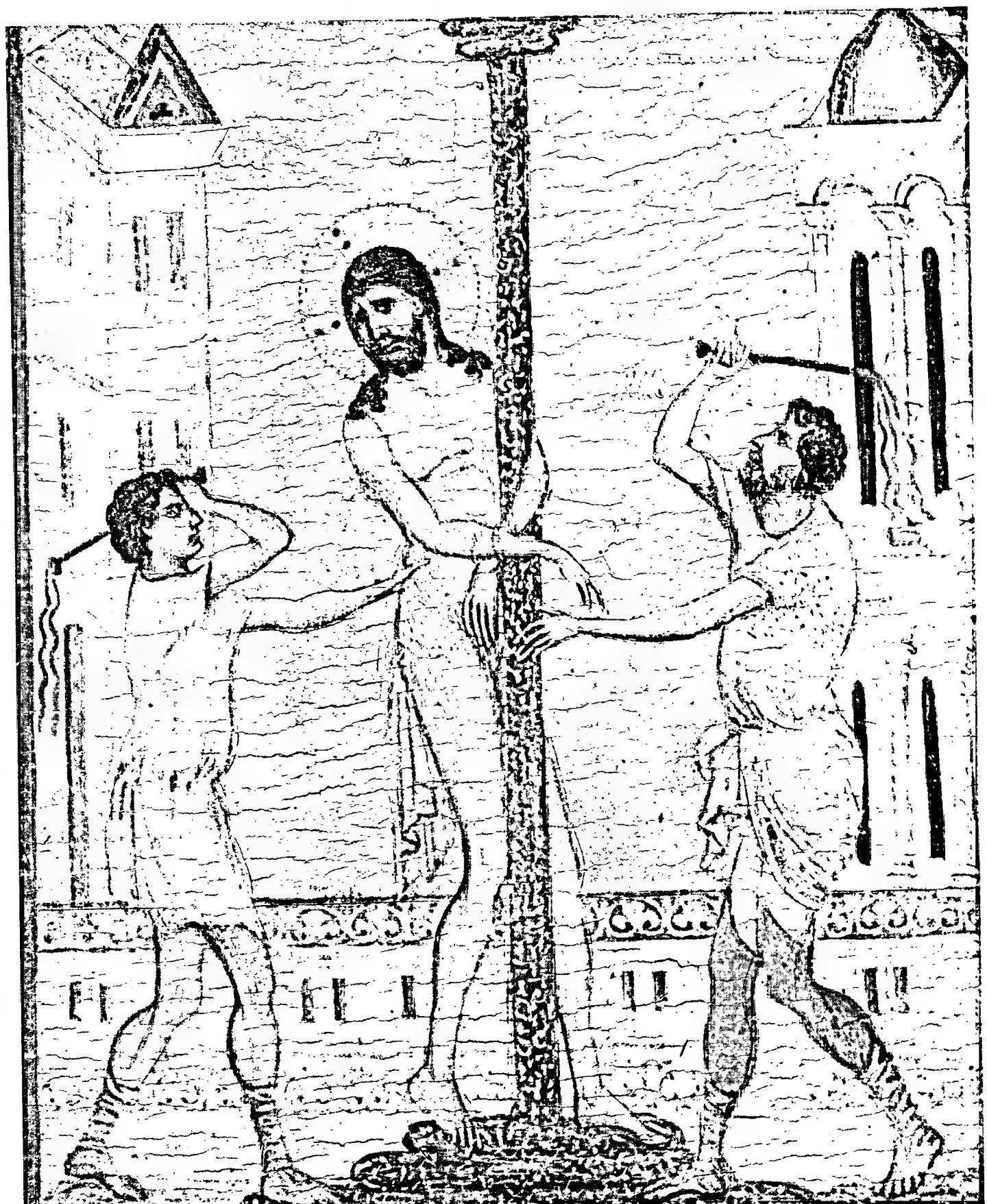


Fig. 1.9: Cimabue, *Flagellation of Christ*, Tempera and gold on wood, 24.8 x 20 cm, The Frick Collection, New York.

associated the colour white with light itself.⁵³ The desire both to model form and also to depict light, aided by lead white's superior whitening effects, in all likelihood prompted Cimabue to adapt the technique of lead white employed in his panel paintings for his wall paintings.⁵⁴ The results were brighter, more luminous works of art, to be sure, but Cimabue's intentional choice of lead white could also, as we shall see, materially encapsulate current Franciscan ideas about the powers of God's light.

Light in the Sanctuary

Cimabue's decision to use lead white, celebrated for its ability to brighten forms and move light, aligns with the philosophical and theological concepts of light known to the friars at Assisi. That the thirteenth century was a pivotal period for the study of optics in Western Europe is well known, and Franciscan friars such as Roger Bacon (c. 1220–92) and John Pecham (c. 1230–92) were among the period's leading theorists.⁵⁵ Drawing upon a wide array of antique and Arab optical knowledge, including the works of Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, and Alhacen, these perspectivists sought firstly to understand the nature of vision. The theories of Bacon and others departed from Platonic concepts of extramission, or the idea that rays move from the eye towards a visible object, to notions of intromission, in which rays of light acting upon objects move toward the eye.⁵⁶ Even while debates about the exact mechanisms of sight raged in the thirteenth century, Bacon and others viewed the movement of optical rays in theological terms.⁵⁷ God was the ultimate source of the light that produced the rays necessary for sight, but these rays were reflected or refracted off objects in the world. Thus God is apprehensible to the eyes on earth indirectly; only in heaven is direct vision of God's glory achieved.⁵⁸ The perspectivists accordingly distinguished divine light or *lux*, that is light in its pure form, from *lumen*, the physical aspect (or species) of *lux* that makes objects visible.⁵⁹ Several scholars have noted that the friars at Assisi very likely knew such theories.⁶⁰ As the motherhouse of the Order, the Sacro Convento was a constant crossroads, with friars who had trained in Oxford or Paris, where many optical treatises of the time were written, residing or passing through the community.⁶¹ Cimabue himself may thus have encountered new ideas about optics at Assisi.

Another connection between theorists on light and the friars at Assisi is Saint Bonaventure (1221–74), Minister General of the Order from 1257 until his death and the leading Franciscan theologian of his day. Excerpts from Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* serve as captions for the frescoes depicting the life of Saint Francis in the Basilica's nave, so it is clear that his writings were well known to the friars in the Sacro Convento.⁶² Bonaventure was steeped in the theological ideas

⁵³ See Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 122. White had also been associated with purity and with light in the West since antiquity; see Barry, 'A Whiter Shade', pp. 33–34.

⁵⁴ Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, p. 5, mentions the use of lead white by painters in an effort to 'give greater brilliance' to their compositions.

⁵⁵ Between 1260 and 1280 several major texts on optics were written by friars Roger Bacon and John Pecham. These include Part V of the *Perspectiva* of Roger Bacon's *Opus Maius*, his *De multiplication specierum*, and John Pecham's *Perspectiva communis*. Bacon's *Opus maius* was sent to Pope Clement IV (1265–8), and in 1277 Pecham arrived at Viterbo, spent two years there and in Rome, where he probably composed his *Perspectiva communis*. See Maginnis, *The World*, pp. 177–78. Although the popes rarely came to Assisi, the Basilica was also a papal chapel, so writings on optics could have reached Assisi via the papal court at Viterbo, where the works of Bacon,

Pecham, as well as the well-known optical treatise by the friar Witelo (c. 1230–c. 1290) were certainly read. See Lindberg, 'Lines of Influence', pp. 66–83.

⁵⁶ Smith, *From Sight to Light*, pp. 184–85.

⁵⁷ On Bacon's view of light as the key to understanding the natural world see Lindberg, 'Roger Bacon on Light', pp. 243–75.

⁵⁸ See the discussions of optical theories in Maginnis, *The World*, pp. 177–78; Lakey, 'The Materiality', p. 121; Hills, *The Light*, pp. 11–14.

⁵⁹ Bacon, *Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 2–5.

⁶⁰ See for example Edgerton, 'John Pecham', pp. 349–50.

⁶¹ Senocak, *The Poor and the Perfect*, pp. 76–143.

⁶² See Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 97–103.

about light seen in the thought of scholastic theologians such as Alexander of Hales (c. 1185–1245), with whom Bonaventure studied in Paris, and Oxford scholar Robert Grosseteste (c. 1175–1253). His understanding of light echoes that of Bacon; *lumen*, the obliquely visible *lux* or light of God, enables humans to gain understanding of God's nature via its visible vestiges in the world around them.⁶³ Bonaventure also defines 'colour' as the quality of *lux* as it becomes visible on the surface of a solid object.⁶⁴ However, Bonaventure's theology also appropriates scholastic and perspectivist concepts of light as they can be used in devotional acts. As had Abbot Suger at St Denis, Bonaventure invoked Pseudo-Dionysius to describe how human perception of physical light can lead the soul on an anagogical journey to comprehending heavenly light.⁶⁵ It is for this reason that he structured his famous meditational treatise, *Itinerarium mentis in deum* (The Mind's Journey into God) around the concept of six progressive 'illuminations'. Mapping this journey using a mnemonic device, Bonaventure connects each meditative exercise of 'illumination' to the six wings of the Seraph, the angelic being envisioned by Francis when he received the stigmata. These six steps '... begin from creatures and lead up to God', meaning that contemplating God via the vestiges of his light visible in earthly things (creatures) can lead to a direct, mystical encounter with Christ, as Francis had experienced.⁶⁶ It was this kind of mystical experience that the friars at Assisi sought in their contemplative practices. For the Franciscans, light was not only crucial to vision, but was also essential as a devout person progressed to acts of inward seeing, moving the mind's eye closer to God.

Given the importance of light in Franciscan thought in the mid thirteenth century, it is no surprise that the structure and embellishment of the basilica at Assisi shows a concern with the permeation and movement of light.⁶⁷ Nancy M. Thompson recently argued that the Franciscan philosophical and theological emphasis on light, particularly the ideas articulated by Bonaventure, informed the friars' decision to use stained glass at Assisi, despite objections raised within the Order about the expense of such adornments.⁶⁸ The basilica at Assisi combines Gothic elements such as rib vaulting and stained glass with large expanses of wall space designed for mural decoration, as in Roman basilicas. The glazing program, likely begun in the 1250s, was the first layer of monumental decoration added to the church after its consecration.⁶⁹ The nave of the Upper Church features a series of tall double lancet windows in each bay as well as a rose window on the façade. The north and south transept walls are each pierced by wide, four lancet windows and an elaborate rose window, while the apse contains three tall double lancet windows, each pair topped with a small quatrefoil (Fig. 1.10).

The windows would have been in place prior to Cimabue's work in the apse and transepts, and so as he was painting, he would have been aware of the constant shifting of coloured light throughout the space. The dominance of lead white in his palette would have made the jewel toned light passing through the stained glass windows even more striking. The painted wall surfaces would have enabled the visibility of colour, as Bonaventure and others defined it, as the physical manifestation of *lux* as it shines onto a solid form. The light streaming in through the windows is refracted light, that is light that passes through a transparent body such as glass or water. Refraction was interpreted metaphorically in a number of ways in the period. Christian exegetes compared

⁶³ See Marrone, *The Light*. For discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of theories of divine illumination and the Franciscans of Cimabue's time, see Pasnau, 'Divine Illumination'.

⁶⁴ See the discussion in Hills, *The Light*, p. 11.

⁶⁵ On Bonaventure's notion of ascent to the divine, see Wendy Peterson Boring, *Seeking Ecstasy: Saint Bonaventure's Epistemology*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 2004.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of Bonaventure's theology of divine light, see Astell, *Eating Beauty*, pp. 123–25. On the Bonaventure's

notion that light leads to the divine as interpreted at Assisi see Neff, 'Byzantine Icons', pp. 357–84.

⁶⁷ Francesca dell'Acqua has likewise underscored how patrons in the period were conscious of the movement of light into and throughout a church; dell'Acqua, 'Glass and Natural Light', in *the Shaping of Sacred Space in the Latin West and in the Byzantine East*, pp. 299–324.

⁶⁸ Thompson, 'The Franciscans', p. 24.

⁶⁹ Thompson, 'The Franciscans', p. 24.



Fig. 1.10: View of Stained Glass Windows in Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

the Virgin Mary's ability to remain pure or 'unbroken' to the passing of light through a window.⁷⁰ Such an allusion would be fitting at Assisi, where the high altar is dedicated to the birth of the Virgin Mary, and Cimabue's murals in the apse celebrate her.⁷¹ The perspectivists also allegorised refracted light as the transfer of God's grace into the faithful.⁷² In his *Opus maius*, Bacon states,

Since the infusion of grace is very clearly illustrated through the multiplication of light, it is in every way expedient that through the corporeal multiplication of light there should be manifested to us the properties of grace in the good, and the rejection of it in the wicked. For in the perfectly good the infusion of grace is compared to light incident directly and perpendicularly, since they do not reflect from them grace nor do they refract it from across the straight course which extends along the road to perfection in life. But the infusion of grace in imperfect, though good men is compared to refracted light ... but sinners, who are in mortal sin, reflect and repel from them the grace of God.⁷³

The friars at Assisi, striving to be Christ's representatives in the world even though they were among the 'imperfect but good', themselves hoped to be conduits of God's light as they celebrated Mass in the mystically illuminated apse and transepts.

Cimabue's murals also show an awareness of the power of reflected light via selected use of gold leaf. The backgrounds of the crossing vault murals depicting the Four Evangelists were

⁷⁰ See for example the discussion in Bruhn, *Lovely Violence*, p. 48.

⁷¹ See also the discussion of light and mosaics as symbolic within a Franciscan church context in Bolgia, 'New Light', pp. 217–28.

⁷² See the discussion of the spiritual qualities of refracted light in Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon*, pp. 147–48.

⁷³ Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, trans. Burke, pp. 238–39.



Fig. 1.11: Cimabue, *Opening of the Sixth Seal* (detail), Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

originally gilded, positioned to reflect the miracle of the Eucharist celebrated at the altar directly below (Fig. 1.1). In the transepts and apse, Cimabue also added to each saintly figure a halo executed in gilded gesso relief, etched with striations indicating rays of light (Fig. 1.11). These gleaming aureoles would have reflected light differently over the course of the hours, and also cast subtle, itinerant shadows within the compositions.⁷⁴ Gilded and mirrored surfaces like these manifested a kind of light termed *splendor*. Another Franciscan scholar of optics, Bartolomeo da Bologna (died c. 1294), offered a clear description of this phenomenon:

However, when rays emanating from a luminous body reach another body that is smooth, polished, and shining, such as a sword or gilded panel, and rebound back from that body this is called *splendor*. And by such reflections on a polished and shining body the light in space is multiplied and such multiplication of light is properly called *splendor*.⁷⁵

As was the case in Cimabue's gilded panel paintings, strokes of *biacca* would have enhanced the *splendor* or 'multiplication of light' from the reflective gold surfaces. The combined effects of the light shining through the stained glass onto Cimabue's bright paintings surely heightened the sense of the invisible divine—that is God's light or *lux*—being made visible within the sacred space.

As work progressed on his paintings at Assisi, Cimabue would have been keenly aware of the changeability of that light over the course of the day and with the shifting seasons. The basilica is oriented from east to west, so the apse and transepts become brilliantly illuminated as the sun sets during the late afternoon and evening. For many hours of the day and night, however, the church was lit not by its windows but only by candles and oil lamps. The importance of light to the Basilica, both in terms of effects and symbolism, was articulated well by a Polish Dominican friar, Vincent of Kielce, who attended the canonization of Saint Stanislas there in 1253, shortly after the Basilica's consecration. Vincent mentions that lamps were hanging from the newly constructed vaults, declaring that they spread glorious, celestial light over the saint's holy body.⁷⁶ The bright strokes of lead white paint Cimabue applied on the walls at Assisi would have enhanced the visibility of the sacred narratives in a variety of lighting conditions. His layering of heavy white strokes on figures, including their faces and drapery, helped them emerge visually against the blue azurite backgrounds of the murals, a contrast comprehended if one imagines the darkened drapery folds of the figures in his south transept crucifixion to be reversed (Fig. 1.3).

Cimabue would have understood well the importance of this kind of chromatic opposition in part because of his work in the medium of mosaic. Despite lingering questions about dating, most scholars agree that Cimabue designed some of the mosaics in the cupola of the baptistry in Florence, and at the end of his career he was commissioned to execute mosaics in the apse of Pisa

⁷⁴ It should be noted here that Cimabue's use of gilded relief haloes follows that of the northern artists who began work in the north transept, but he continues it throughout the space, whereas the technique was abandoned for the nave decoration by the artists that succeeded him. For a discussion of the materiality of light and the qualities of reflection in similarly sculpted haloes in the Arena Chapel see Lakey, 'The Materiality', pp. 119–36.

⁷⁵ Squadrani, 'Tractatus de luce', p. 231, translation in Hills, *The Light*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Vincent writes of the 'luxerent luminaria in media testudine' that shine with divine splendor: 'Nec vacabat a misterio luminositas tanti splendoris, sed figurabant celeste lumen, quod apparuit in custodia gloriosi corporis...' For this document and discussion see Nesi, pp. 84–93. I would like to thank one of the anonymous peer reviewers for leading me to this reference.



Fig. 1.12: Attributed to Cimabue and various artists, *Christ in Majesty and Biblical Scenes*, Mosaic, Baptistry, Florence.

Cathedral.⁷⁷ The friars at Assisi may have originally considered using mosaic decoration in the apse and transepts; restoration efforts following the 1997 earthquake revealed that mosaic tesserae were applied to the keystones of the vaults in the north and south transept bays. These must have been placed there early in the history of the building. As Maria Andaloro noted, the northern European artists who first began painting the north transept chose to cover these tesserae with plaster, but Cimabue preserved them in the south transept vault.⁷⁸ This care taken by Cimabue may reflect his own familiarity with the medium. In Florence, the baptistry mosaics are illuminated by a single small oculus that directs the shifting sunlight into the triangular shaped facets of the octagonal ceiling (Fig. 1.12). As one facet of the mosaic becomes illuminated, the others fall into shadow. The bright white tesserae gleam against the glittering gold backgrounds, and stand out regardless of whether the scenes are cast in direct sunlight or shade. White tesserae form the horizontal ground lines of the images and also adorn the columns that divide the scenes, thus aiding the viewer's comprehension of the narratives. Like lead white, the white tesserae in the baptistry are bright and opaque, ideal for capturing the light reflecting off of the gold tesserae of the mosaic backgrounds.⁷⁹ Cimabue's lead white would therefore have helped viewers to apprehend light in the sanctuary, ensuring not only that the sacred narratives remained comprehensible, but also that viewers continuously experienced the divine in the form of light.

⁷⁷ The Florentine baptistry mosaics are heavily restored and the work of many different artists, but most scholars agree on the attribution of several panels to Cimabue. The dating of these mosaics is heavily debated, but Cimabue may also have had some training in, or at the very least exposure to, the art of mosaic in Rome, where he is documented in 1272, prior to working at Assisi. See Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 118–26. It is notable also the several Franciscan friars worked as mosaicists in the

Florentine baptistry and elsewhere. See Bolgia, 'Mosaics and Gilded Glass', pp. 141–66.

⁷⁸ Andaloro, 'Tracce della prima', pp. 77–100.

⁷⁹ But while the mosaics in Florence were designed to be viewed from a distance and at an angle, most of Cimabue's paintings at Assisi lend themselves to closer viewing, so his strokes of paint are broader, and of course more blended, than the solid striations of colour in his mosaics.



Fig. 1.13: *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata and Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds*, Antiphonary. 34 x 23.5 cm, Vatican Library, Arch.Cap.S.Pietro. B.87, folio 78r.

Francis' Seraphic Fire

The enhanced light effects enabled by Cimabue's lead white at Assisi might also prompt contemplation of the theological connections between Saint Francis and God's light. While the importance of light was by no means unique to Franciscan spirituality, the Order's celebration of Francis was framed in terms of his particular divine luminosity. In his biography of Francis, declared the only official *vita* of the saint in 1266, Bonaventure insisted on the primacy of light to Francis' sanctity. Bonaventure's prologue describes how Francis himself was a light illuminating the way to God, who

Gave him as light for believers ... that by bearing witness to the light he might prepare for the Lord a way of light and peace to the hearts of his faithful. Shining with the splendor of his life and teaching, like the morning star in the midst of clouds, by his resplendent rays he guided into the light those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death ... like the rainbow shining among clouds of glory ...⁸⁰

References to Francis' splendor—and here I think he means the way Francis reflects divine *lux* as defined in the abovementioned optical treatises—abound throughout Bonaventure's text. In one instance when Francis prayed, for example, his fellow friars saw his body stretched out in the form of a cross, surrounded by a 'shining cloud...witness to the wonderful light that shone within his soul'.⁸¹ Invoking the typology of the prophet Elijah, Bonaventure goes on to describe Francis' light in terms of fire; when Francis preached his 'word was like a burning fire'⁸² and 'like a glowing coal he seemed totally absorbed in the flame of divine love'.⁸³

The apogee of Francis' embodiment of divine light and fire came when he received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ that appeared in his hands, feet, and side. In their efforts to articulate visually the incredible event of the stigmatization, artists depicted the power that passed between the Seraph and Francis as rays of divine light. In many of the earliest scenes of Francis' stigmatization, such as that painted on a panel by the Maestro della Croce c. 1230–50, now in the Uffizi (Fig. 1.8), golden beams of light stream from the seraph to Francis' head. A similar iconography can be seen in an antiphonary illuminated c. 1270 now in the Vatican Library (Fig. 1.13), but in this case, thin strokes of lead white were used to create the rays of light shining onto Francis' head.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, shortly after Cimabue painted the transept at Assisi, artists began to connect Francis' vision and light even more emphatically by depicting him physically branded by rays of light radiating from a Christ-seraph figure directly to Francis' hands, feet, and side.⁸⁵ In the nave frescoes of the Upper Church at Assisi, painted c. 1290, the Saint Francis Master (or Giotto) originally depicted these rays with bright strokes of white paint, glowing against the deep blue background (Fig. 1.14).⁸⁶ The colour white continued to represent divine light as revealed in Francis' vision.

It is here that we might speculate that Cimabue recommended lead white to the friars at Assisi for reasons even beyond its light-enhancing capabilities. Such motives concern the potential of lead white itself as a material metaphor for his subjects. Cennino Cennini's treatise on art making describes lead white as 'focosa', a word that is often translated as 'brilliant' but can also mean 'fiery', an allusion to its unmatched reflective whiteness, as mentioned

⁸⁰ Bonaventure, *LM*, Prologue, in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 526.

⁸¹ as well as more elaborate arguments about the depiction of Francis' stigmata in Frugoni, *Francesco e l'Invenzione*.

⁸¹ Bonaventure, *LM* 10:4 in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 607.

⁸⁶ Although the description of the fresco in the recent book by Cooper and Robson notes that these rays were originally gilded, restoration and reconstruction efforts carried out in 2010 reveal that they were white. Here *bianco di san Giovanni* rather than lead white was used. See Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 127, and Basile, *I Colouri di Giotto*, p. 101.

⁸² Bonaventure, *LM* 12:7 in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 625.

⁸³ Bonaventure, *LM* 9:1 in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 596.

⁸⁴ Nashville, cat. no.10, pp. 111–13.

⁸⁵ See the discussion in Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 144–

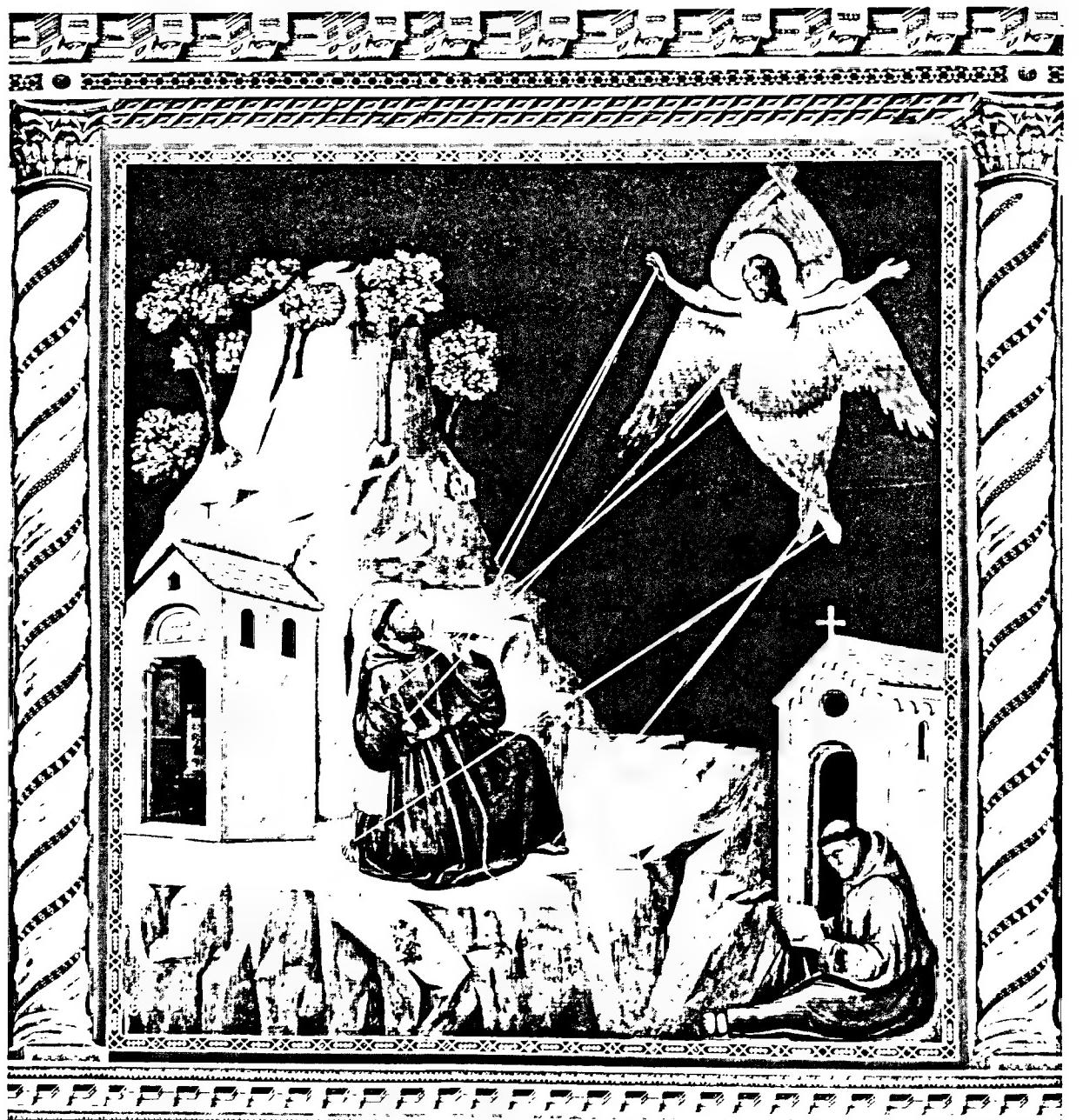


Fig. 1.14: Giotto, *St. Francis Receives the Stigmata*, 1295, fresco, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi (digital color reconstruction).

above.⁸⁷ In medieval treatises, lead itself was frequently recommended as a purifying agent in the refining process of metals by heating them over flames. The Dominican friar Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–80) similarly associated the making of lead white with fire; he described how vinegar 'burned' lead in the process of forming the white, leaving 'burnt earthiness'.⁸⁸ The fiery nature of lead white, revealed in both properties and processes, finds a fitting analogue in the imagery of divine fire as catalyst for spiritual transformation in Franciscan theology.

⁸⁷ As Lara Broecke recently noted, Cennino's meaning of the word 'focosa' is unclear, since lead was an earth rather than a fire element. Cennino seems to be deliberately contrasting the nature of lead white with that of *bianco di sangiovanni*, for it reacts when mixed with water to form a suspension so that the mixture runs like pure water. Cennino refers again to fire when talking about the production of slaked lime, which is

formed by soaking quicklime in water, causing the 'fire' to go out of the lime. In describing the slaking of gesso, Cennino also says that 'every spark of fire' is eliminated by soaking it in water. See Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85, note 2.

⁸⁸ Albertus Magnus, *The Book of Minerals*, p. 216; see also the discussion in Bucklow, 'Lead White's Mysteries', p. 147.

Fire is a key leitmotif throughout Bonaventure's description of Francis' stigmatization. Francis 'was totally aflame with a Seraphic fire', from the Seraph, the red angelic being whose brilliance Francis saw in a vision as he received the stigmata. In the *Celestial Hierarchy* written by Pseudo-Dionysius and quoted by Bonaventure in his description of Francis' stigmatization, the Seraphim are described as the angels that are closest to God, and they are fiery because they reflect God's radiant charity.⁹⁰ Thus when Francis saw the Seraph in his vision, it had 'six fiery and shining wings'. Francis' love for Christ—the subject of his meditations at the moment he received the vision—was also cast in terms of the fire of love: 'The unconquerable enkindling of love in Him for the good Jesus had grown into lamps and flames of fire, that many waters could not quench so powerful a love'.⁹¹ The notion of burning as a means to refinement and purification of metals recalls the biblical trope and metaphor of the necessary cleansing fire needed to purify one's soul. The fire of the stigmata served likewise to 'refine' Francis; according to Bonaventure, Francis experienced a threefold act of cleansing from God who 'purifies, illuminates and inflames'.⁹¹ The process of transformation represented by lead white, which turned from a dull metal into shining powder, was likewise enabled by the 'fire' of vinegar and resulted in substance that was resplendent, fiery.

It therefore seems appropriate that Cimabue would choose 'fiery' lead white to embellish the apse and transepts at Assisi, where references to Francis' stigmata are embedded throughout the murals' complex iconography. The event is implied via the murals' visual connection of Christ's crucifixion to the sanctity of Francis. This concept is asserted by the presence of the two crucifixion scenes in the north and south transepts. In each of these, Francis kneels at the foot of the cross with the wounds of his stigmata clearly visible on his hands and feet. The darkened patches of lead white on Francis' skin indicate their original brilliance, which would have highlighted the black nail marks depicted (Fig. 1.2). Further, each crucifixion scene is topped by an image in the lunette above it that relates directly to Francis' stigmatization (Fig. 1.15). The north transept lunette features a Transfiguration scene, in which the apostles Peter, James and John apostles ascend a mountain where they witness Christ elevated and recognized by God along with an apparition of Moses and Elijah. Light and the colour white are both central to the biblical account of this event; as Matthew's gospel relates, Christ's 'face did shine as the sun and his garments became white as snow'.⁹² As in other contemporary representations of the Transfiguration, Christ is surrounded by a mandorla out of which rays of light stream. He is also shown with a gleaming white face and garments, consistent with the biblical description of the event, but now unfortunately darkened due to the heavy layers of lead white.⁹³ Bonaventure links Francis' stigmata to the Transfiguration of Christ via references to the passage in the book of Matthew describing how Francis ascended and then descended from Mount La Verna after his vision. At Assisi, Cimabue's crucifixion with Francis finds its typological link in the Transfiguration scene above it.⁹⁴

In the south transept, the parallel lunette painted by Cimabue has been almost entirely lost, but traces of angelic wings can be seen. The mural most likely depicted Christ in glory in a mandorla surrounded by choirs of angels, including the Seraphim, a connection to the kneeling image of the stigmatized Francis below (Fig. 1.2). The stigmata strongly informed the themes chosen for the apse, dedicated to Mary, and the south transept, dedicated to the Apocalypse, Saint Michael and the angels. In 1224, on Mount La Verna, Francis retreated to fast in honor of Saint Michael and Mary, and it was thus the devotion to these particular saints that prompted his receipt of

⁸⁹ Bonaventure, *LM* 13:7 in FAED, p. 637. Frugoni also notes that the seraph symbolizes the love of God, which is what Francis was meditating on when he received the vision. See Frugoni, *Francis of Assisi*, chapter 6.

⁹⁰ Bonaventure, *Major Legend*, 13:2 in FAED vol. 2, p. 631.

⁹¹ The original Latin is 'purgat, illuminat et inflamat'. See Bonaventure, *LM*, 13:7, in FAED, p. 635.

⁹² DRB, Matthew 17: 1–10.

⁹³ It should be noted that the northern European workshop began work in the north transept. See Binski, pp. 73–138. On these and other images of the Transfiguration and their meaning for the Franciscans, see Neff, 'Byzantium Westernized', pp. 81–102.

⁹⁴ Bonaventure refers to the Transfiguration account at the beginning of his narrative of Francis' stigmata, see Bonaventure, *LM* 13:1 in FAED, p. 630.



Fig. 1.15: View of transepts and nave from apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

the stigmata.⁹⁵ The stigmatization was interpreted by exegetes such as Bonaventure as Christ's impressing of a seal upon the body of Francis, analogous to the seals on the book of the Apocalypse. Francis's charitable fire also mirrored Christ's love for mankind, which the friars believed would bring about the Apocalypse and Christ's final conquest of evil. The choice to include an image of the Opening of the Sixth Seal among the Apocalypse scenes at Assisi (Fig. 1.16), in which the enthroned Christ hovers in a mandorla, adored by kneeling friars below, can therefore be seen as an oblique reference to Francis' stigmatization, but one the friars would have easily understood. Brilliant white lead white pigments used liberally throughout the Apocalypse cycle perhaps served as a further reminder of the fire of Francis' love that made him worthy of the stigmata.

The connection between the Christological embodiment achieved by Francis in his stigmatization and the mystical imagery of fire may also have been a consideration as Cimabue was decorating the transept, the space surrounding the basilica's high altar. It was in this most sacred locus that salvific acts of transformation akin to Francis' stigmatization occurred regularly during Mass, as the bread and wine became mystically transformed into the body and blood of Christ.⁹⁶ The Franciscans offered a model for the personal experience of Eucharistic transformation in Francis. As Bonaventure made clear, Francis' embodiment of Christ was akin to the process of transubstantiation:

The unconquerable enkindling of love in [Francis] for the Good Jesus had grown into lamps and flames of fire that many waters could not quench so powerful a love. With the seraphic ardor of desires therefore, he was being borne aloft into God; and by compassionate sweetness he was being transformed into Him who chose to be crucified out of the excess of his love.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ On the connection of the stigmatization to the themes chosen for the apse and transepts at Assisi see Frugoni, 'L'ombra', pp. 345–93.

⁹⁶ For a full discussion of this theology see Seubert, 'The

Transubstantiation', p. 219, and Seubert, 'Isaiah's Servant', pp. 28–32.

⁹⁷ Bonaventure, *LM*, in *FAED*, vol. 2, pp. 631–32.

As the faithful gathered to ingest the consecrated Host, Christ entered into the faithful physically, as had happened to Francis. Although their hope was for purification and salvation—not the exceptional stigmatization Francis achieved—Christians partaking of the Eucharist could still model themselves after Francis, aspiring to the transformational mystical union akin to that Francis had experienced. In his *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure noted that:

But the mind does not attain Christ except through understanding and love, through faith and charity, so that faith gives light to recognize him and charity gives ardor to love him. Therefore if any are to approach this sacrament worthily, they must feed on Christ spiritually by chewing it by means of the recognition of faith and receiving it with the devotion of love. In this way they will not be transforming Christ into themselves, but instead will be taken up into the mystical body of Christ.⁹⁸

For Bonaventure, light and fire again enable these encounters; 'faith gives light' for those approaching the Eucharistic table, and Francis' love 'had grown into lamps and flames of fire'. A space embellished with fiery white pigments, themselves formed through a transformational process, might thus allude to the Franciscan theology of the Eucharist.

In Christian exegesis, fire was also a typological leitmotif for the Eucharist. As a reenactment of Christ's sacrificial death, the Eucharist represented the holocausts, that is, the offerings burned on the altar in Jewish sacrificial traditions, described throughout the Old Testament.⁹⁹ In a series of five sermons, *De Coena Domini* (On the Lord's Supper), Bonaventure interpreted the flesh of the sacrificial lamb 'roasted by fire' in Exodus 12:8–11 as a prefiguration of the Eucharist: 'The flesh of Christ is a certain burning ember ... thus the flesh of this Lamb must be roasted'.¹⁰⁰ For Bonaventure, this burning is metaphorical rather than literal. It is the love or charity of Christ that 'enkindles' the salvific power of the transubstantiated bread and wine. It is this same imagery of the burning fire of love that we saw Bonaventure apply to Francis' stigmatization. Thus Cimabue's choice of lead white—set apart by its fiery nature—would have been appropriate within a space where, inspired by Francis, the faithful would gather to have their souls purified via the Eucharistic feast.

Lead White, Alchemy, and the Friars

If the friars at Assisi were indeed interested in the mysteries of mutated matter, as evidenced by their emphasis on the Eucharist and Francis' stigmata, they may also have valued lead white's symbolic potential as a transformed substance. Treatises on natural philosophy and on art making from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries underscore the fact that profound physical changes occur in the making of *biacca*. In multiple sources, the making of lead white is connected specifically to alchemy, defined in the period as the art of transforming matter.¹⁰¹ Cennino Cennini, for example, is careful to note that lead white is formed 'by alchemy'.¹⁰² Likewise, in his discussion of the nature of lead in his book of minerals, Albertus Magnus cites ancient alchemical knowledge as he details the making of lead white:

⁹⁸ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, ed. Monti, p. 244.

⁹⁹ On the typology of fire and the Eucharist, see O'Meara, 'In the Hearth of the Virginal Womb', pp. 75–88.

¹⁰⁰ Bonaventure, *De Coena Domini V in Opera Omnia*, vol. IX, pp. 248.

¹⁰¹ Although alchemy is traditionally regarded as the science of attempting to turn lead into gold, a goal certainly expressed by Roger Bacon, the field of alchemy had wider aims. As Chiara Crisciani put it, alchemy was the '...

knowledge of hidden things and the art of transformation towards perfection'. See Crisciani, 'Opus and Sermo', p. 4.

¹⁰² '... biancho e un cholore archimato di pionbo il quale si chiama biacha ...' Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 85. Cennino also identifies minium, vermillion, orpiment, and verdigris as 'alchemical', but it is important to note that in his description of another yellow, giallorino, he mentions that it is produced 'artificially though not by alchemy', so alchemy was a distinct process. See Bucklow, 'Alchemy and Colour', pp. 108–17.

And Hermes, who has proved much about the transmutations of metals, in his *Alchemy* reports that, if plates of lead are suspended over a vessel containing much strong vinegar, so that the vapor of the vinegar is continually in contact with the lead plates, the vapor will condense and destroy the substance of the lead, and change it into a white powder that is called *cerusa*.¹⁰³

Albertus makes it clear that the substance of the lead is destroyed in the alchemical metamorphosis. The resulting material is pure, white; Albertus states that the bits of powder that appear on the surface of the lead plates 'grow whiter because they are more thoroughly purified'.¹⁰⁴ A kindred sense of potential for dramatic change enabled by alchemy is seen in the alchemical treatise by the Franciscan friar Bonaventura da Iseo (died c. 1273), who in his *Liber compostelle* writes:

A man expert in this kind of art, called alchimia, knows how to make many things from the beginning, if he wants, like silver and gold, salts, precious stones, dyes and colours like azure, cinnabar, white, verdigris, lacquer, and so on. He knows how to destroy many things, like all the spirits and metals, precious and non-precious stones, wood, marcasite, and so on, converting many of them to dust, clear water, oil, glass.¹⁰⁵

Bonaventura mentions the making of white pigment here in his definition of the art of alchemy, noting also the powers of creation, as well as destruction and conversion, that alchemy can enable. His description hints that alchemical work is akin to God's own creative powers, and in this way Bonaventura's statement reflects contemporary thirteenth-century reconciliations of alchemy within a Christian worldview. At this moment in Europe, the study of alchemy was shaped by the Augustinian idea that all living things, including matter, are created by God, but most remain 'seeds', and need to have their transformative potential unlocked.¹⁰⁶ Alchemy was believed to have the power to enable this potential.

Bonaventura's comments also underline the close, longstanding connection between art making and alchemy. It is noteworthy that treatises on art making such as Cennino's as well as more general writings on natural philosophy like the book of minerals of Albertus Magnus mention lead white's alchemical production. Scholars now understand that much of the alchemical knowledge to survive into the Middle Ages from antiquity did so via treatises on pigments and dyes.¹⁰⁷ It is in such a context of shared knowledge that Cimabue's technical skills were viewed via the friars' prism of alchemical understanding. Although I am the first scholar (to my knowledge) to attempt to connect the Franciscans' interest in alchemy to the patronage of art at Assisi, discussions of alchemy surely occurred in the Sacro Convento in the thirteenth century. Bonaventura of Iseo was only one of several prominent Franciscans of the period to author treatises on alchemy. Brother Elias of Cortona, the second Minister General of the Order who was later deposed and excommunicated, was believed to be the author of alchemical writings.¹⁰⁸ Roger Bacon was also a prolific student of alchemy, and acknowledged the production of artists' pigments in his definition of 'practical' alchemy. Bacon does not mention lead white, but he does include minium, a red pigment formed by burning lead white, in a short list of pigments he cites in defining the various applications of alchemy.¹⁰⁹ At the request of Pope Clement IV, Roger Bacon sent treatises on alchemy to the

¹⁰³ Albertus also notes that that lead itself has the power to reduce lust and nocturnal emissions if worn as a belt around the hips, but also warns that it can cause madness, paralysis, and unconsciousness. Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, pp. 210–11.

¹⁰⁴ Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, p. 211.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Succurro, 'The *Liber Compostelle*', p. 213.

¹⁰⁶ For attempts to reconcile alchemy and Christianity in the thirteenth century see Matus, 'Alchemy and Christianity' in the Middle Ages', p. 934–45.

¹⁰⁷ Wallert, 'Alchemy and Medieval Art Technology', pp. 154–61.

¹⁰⁸ Several texts have been attributed to Elias, but scholarly consensus has not been reached as to their authorship. For these see Vinciguerra, 'The *ars alchemie*', pp. 57–67.

¹⁰⁹ 'Sed alia est scientia ... de azurio, et minio, et caeteris coloribus ... Est autem alkimia operative et practica, quae docet facere metalla nobilia, et colores ...' Bacon, *Opus tertium*, pp. 39–40.



Fig. 1.16: Cimabue, *Opening of the Sixth Seal*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

papal court.¹¹⁰ Although the popes rarely visited Assisi despite the Basilica's designation as a papal chapel, traveling friars could have brought Bacon's writings on alchemy, like his works on optics, to the friars responsible for Cimabue's commission.

How then might the Franciscan interest in alchemy relate to Cimabue's extensive use of 'alchemical' lead white at Assisi? It suggests again that the friars were aware of lead white's material nature and its symbolic potential. As a purified, changed substance, *biacca* would have made an ideologically appropriate material for embellishing the Assisi apse and transepts, particularly the Apocalypse scenes. As seen in the writings of Roger Bacon, natural philosophers in Europe in the thirteenth century viewed alchemy in eschatological terms, wanting to harness its abilities of transmutation to perfect bodies and save souls. In the wake of the apocalyptic prophesies of the twelfth-century monk Joachim of Fiore, there was widespread belief that the Apocalypse could be imminent. Although Joachim's prophecies were officially declared heretical, the Franciscans and other mendicant orders strove to be active participants in the realization of Saint John's apocalyptic vision. Bonaventure, as we have seen, compared Francis to the angel of the Sixth Seal of the Apocalypse, and the Franciscans saw themselves as part of a global movement to combat heresy and the infidel.¹¹¹ It is for this reason in part that the Apocalypse was the theme chosen for Cimabue's murals in the south transept at Assisi, as I will explain further in Chapter 2. Cimabue illustrates the immediate relevance of the Apocalypse to the Order in the abovementioned mural depicting the Opening of the Sixth Seal (Fig. 1.16), in which Franciscan friars kneel below the apocalyptic Christ, witnesses to and participants in his ultimate triumph over evil.¹¹² Alchemy was also understood as a potential weapon in this spiritual warfare. Roger Bacon was among the most vocal advocates of using alchemy to create tools to be used against Antichrist. Among other things, he developed a formula for an ingestible elixir that would prolong human life, in the hopes that more souls could be saved before the impending end times.¹¹³

Bacon asserted that rays emanating from celestial bodies were essential to the activation of this elixir; divine light and energy combined with alchemical knowledge enabled physical and spiritual metamorphosis. With the elixir, Bacon proposed to bring the human body closer to that of the perfect resurrected body, the body of Adam before the fall. The elixir was to transform a human's appearance, as well as his or her moral character and ability to understand God's wisdom.¹¹⁴ Inward perfection manifested itself as outward luminosity in this paradisiacal body. Franciscan theological writings of the period show a kindred interest in this notion of physical purification. Bonaventure, for example, explains in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* that the purified, resurrected body has the same properties as divine light or *lux*: brightness, agility, incorruptibility, and penetrability.¹¹⁵ Both Thomas of Celano and later Bonaventure, in describing the aftermath of Francis' death, note how the saint's body radiated this kind of heavenly splendor. Saintly bodies, even as they remained on earth, were believed to be the same perfected bodies as the resurrected bodies in heaven.¹¹⁶ Significantly, this purified body was believed to increase in whiteness. Both Celano and Bonaventure describe the luminous paleness of Francis' saintly body.¹¹⁷ Bonaventure marvels at how 'The rest of [Francis'] skin, which before was inclined to be

dark both naturally and from his illness, now shone with a dazzling whiteness, prefiguring the beauty of that glorious second stole'.¹¹⁸ The 'second stole' Bonaventure refers to here is the biblical notion of the garment of salvation that will be given to those in heaven.¹¹⁹

The metaphorical connections between skin and garment, as well as notions of renewal and cleanliness as signs of salvation, are also at play here. Bonaventure hints that the heavenly ascent of Francis' soul mystically transformed the saint's skin from dark to light, heightening the contrast between his white skin and the black nails of the stigmata, 'The nails appeared black against his shining skin, and the wound in his side was red like a rose in springtime so that it is no wonder the onlookers were amazed and overjoyed at the sight of such varied and miraculous beauty'.¹²⁰ Francis' sanctity engendered the purifying, transformative process intended in the alchemical production of Bacon's elixir. Such a radical, visible purification is also echoed in Albertus Magnus' description of the whiteness of purified *biacca* emerging from the lead plates. It seems appropriate, then, for Cimabue to have applied heavy layers of alchemically created lead white to his Apocalypse murals at Assisi. The mutability of the matter of lead, its transformation from a dark substance to one that shone brightly, is a fitting metaphor for the power of Christ, mediated through the luminosity of Francis, to bring souls to salvation over death and darkness.

It is in the Franciscan understanding of light, as well as the Order's interest in spiritual and physical transformation, that we can interpret Cimabue's use of lead white in new ways. His choice to use lead white on walls, as risky as it was, suggests that he reached towards visual effects with larger exegetical goals, likely in collaboration with his Franciscan patrons. Although scholars have tended to think of artists' choice of materials primarily in practical terms, and to view artists of the late thirteenth century as mere craftsmen, Cimabue was living in a time when artists were moving in intellectual circles.¹²¹ Recent research on Cennino's treatise, in fact, postulates that his discussion of alchemy in regards to pigments was an attempt to boost the academic authority of his treatise. Indeed, he leaves out the recipe for lead white in favour of describing its properties—its alchemical nature and its brightness. In other words, Cimabue, working in a moment of significant changes in the visual arts, was more than capable of deploying materials in ways that reached beyond their practical usages.¹²² In accordance with new theories on optics of the period, Cimabue's choice to use 'firey' lead white made his paintings brighter and more efficient conduits of celestial light. Light and the color white were also of central importance to the Order's conception of Francis' sanctity. The Franciscans' appreciation of the science of alchemy and their desire for spiritual and physical transformation may also have informed Cimabue's choice to use *biacca*, an alchemically produced pigment. Considering these wider possibilities for Cimabue's choice of lead white allows us to see him as part of a more sophisticated set of artistic and religious concerns than those portrayed in traditional narratives of stylistic innovation and the pre-Renaissance quest for 'naturalism'. In this pivotal period in the history of art, splendor and otherworldly effects were equally sought, and materials could become metaphorical signs of spiritual and physical metamorphosis. Cimabue's unorthodox use of materials therefore enhanced the innovative compositional and iconographic schemes he devised at Assisi, as will be explored in the following chapters.

¹¹⁰ Bacon's best known alchemical treatise is the *Epistola de Secretis Operibus Artis et Natura et de Nullitate Magiae*. Alchemy is also included in his *Opus tertium* and other tracts. See Newman, 'An Overview of Roger Bacon's Alchemy', pp. 317–36.

¹¹¹ On the Franciscans and their apocalyptic mission as it relates to the Crusades as well as the writings of Roger Bacon, see Whalen, *Dominion of God*, chapters 6 and 7. See also Burr, 'Franciscan Exegesis', pp. 51–62.

¹¹² For discussion of eschatology in relation to Cimabue's Assisi murals, see Frugoni, *Quale Francesco*, 98–101.

¹¹³ See Matus, 'Resurrected Bodies', pp. 323–40, and for further discussion of the elixir, see Matus, *Heaven in a Bottle*.

¹¹⁴ Matus, 'Resurrected Bodies', p. 331.

¹¹⁵ Matus, 'Resurrected Bodies', pp. 333–34. See further discussion in Astell, *Eating Beauty*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Bynum, *The Resurrection*, p. 200.

¹¹⁷ Thomas of Celano's account likewise highlights the brightness of Francis' skin and its contrast with the blackness of his wounds, comparing the wounds to black stones in a white pavement. See Thomas of Celano, *The First Life*, ed. Stace, chapters 112, 113, pages 112–15.

¹¹⁸ Bonaventure, LM 15.2 in FAED, vol. 2, p. 646. As Amy Neff has noted, Christ is shown with blond hair in some of the images at Assisi, perhaps also an illusion to the notion of physical lightness as a sign of divinity and perfection. See Neff, 'Byzantine Icons', p. 381.

¹¹⁹ This garment of salvation is mentioned in Isaiah 61:10.

¹²⁰ Bonaventure, LM 15.3 in FAED vol. 2, p. 646.

¹²¹ Much has been made for example of Giotto's connection

to the university during his stay in Padua. See for instance the arguments in Derbes and Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart*, and for Giotto's connections to intellectuals in Padua see Frojmovic, pp. 195–210.

¹²² As Broecke noted, '...because the discussion of pigments is allied to the study of alchemy, Cennino may have felt that the inclusion of material concerning the origins and making of pigments would bring intellectual prestige to his treatise'. See Cennino, *Il Libro*, p. 9.



CHAPTER 2

Sensory Engagement and Contemplative Transformation: The Assisi Transepts

For one time when [Francis'] body was weighed down by many forms of illness, he had a desire to hear some music to arouse the joy of his spirit. But since it seemed inappropriate that this should be done by a human ministry, the deference of angels came to indulge the holy man's pleasure. One night, as he was keeping vigil and meditating about the Lord, suddenly a lute was playing some wonderful harmony and a very sweet melody. No one was seen, but the changes in his hearing suggested that the lute player was moving back and forth from one place to another. With his spirit turned to God, there was such delight in that sweet sounding song, that he thought he had exchanged this world for another.¹

This anecdote, recounted in Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, illustrates well the inherent tensions in the spirituality of Francis when it came to the senses. While Bonaventure praises Francis's holy austerity and his constant forsaking of bodily comforts, he also describes sensorial pleasures, such as Francis' vision of the angelic music here, as essential to the saint's divine encounters. Similar tensions might have been observed by visitors to the Basilica at Assisi. The friars who shunned the comforts of the body, a renunciation signaled constantly by their rough brown habits, worshipped God in a splendidly coloured space where fragrant incense, sacred music, and even the taste of God himself in the Eucharist stimulated the senses. Despite the rigors of devotion to poverty, as we have seen, the Franciscans at Assisi did not avoid all luxury when it came to decorating the house of God (Fig. 2.1). The Franciscans and Cimabue were evidently aware of the power of the sense of sight; as revealed in the previous chapter, the beauty of bright white lead pigments could point symbolically towards spiritual transformation. In this chapter, I will explore the ways that the imagery of the murals in the Upper Church transepts promoted an array of sensorial experiences for their viewers, engaging the bodily senses as a step on the journey to the experience of God.

My approach is inspired by recent trends in art history focused on the study of the senses and their function in the reception of works of art. Scholars have highlighted the potential art had for encouraging a viewer's synesthetic (multi-sensory) religious experiences via materials, compositional strategies, iconography, or other means.² Recent studies have also applied Richard Shusterman's theories of somaesthetics to works of art, assessing the way that images promoted

¹ Bonaventure, *LM* 5: 11, in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 567.

² For an introduction to some of the current issues in the art historical 'sensory turn' see Benay and Rafanelli, introduction.

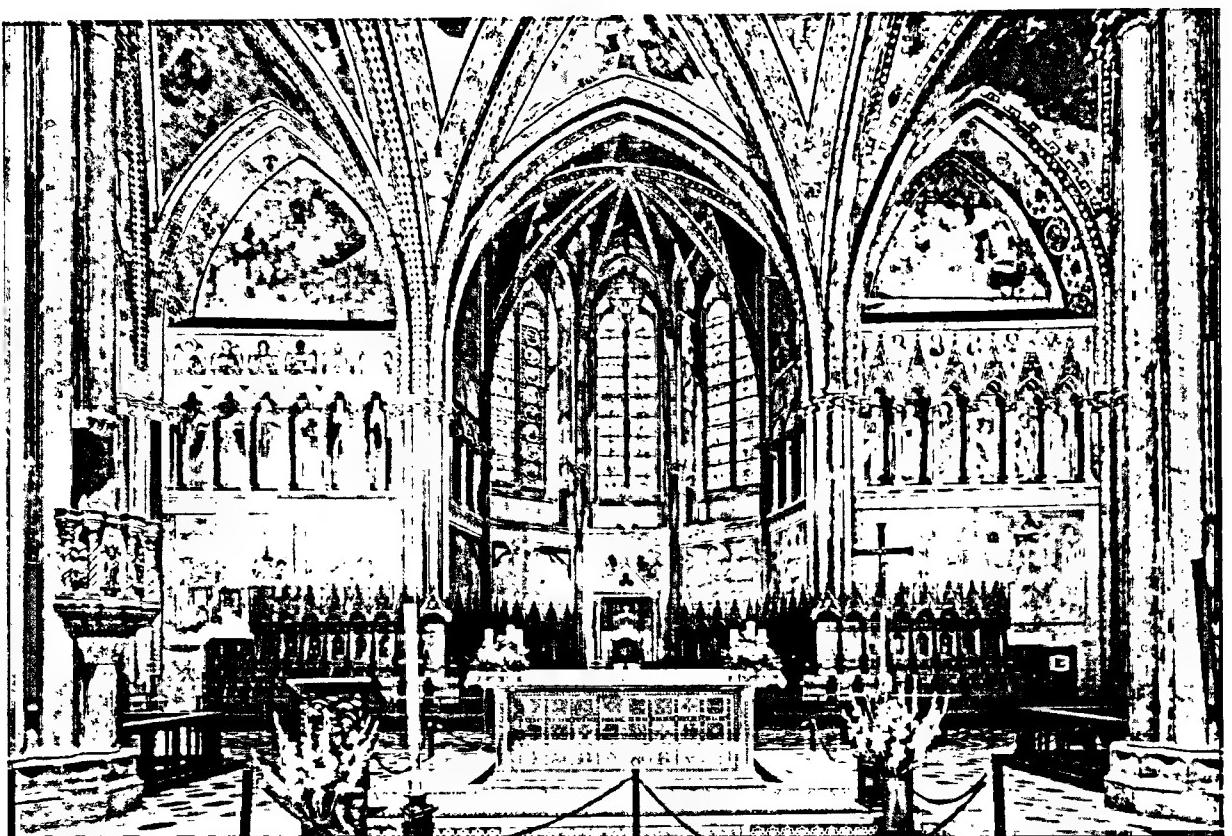


Fig. 2.1: View of Apse and Transepts, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

a viewer's bodily experience of those works.³ Although informed by contemporary art historical approaches, my interest in the senses is also firmly rooted in the historical moment of Cimabue's paintings. As noted in the Introduction, thirteenth century theology saw the revival of the Aristotelian notion that all knowledge begins with sensory experience.⁴ Aristotelian philosophy has therefore also been connected to advances in the study of optics, as explored in Chapter 1, as well as the emphasis on the natural world seen in the art and culture of this time. More specific to Cimabue's murals, sensory engagement was central to the devotional practices promoted by the Franciscan Order, seen most clearly in the works of Bonaventure such as the *Itinerarium mentis in deum*. As mentioned in the Introduction, in this treatise on meditation, Bonaventure borrows heavily from Augustine's Platonic theories of ascent to God.⁵ The bodily senses allowed one to move step by step towards experiential knowledge of God, which, once achieved, activated what Bonaventure called the 'spiritual senses'. Mirroring the five bodily senses, these spiritual senses are found at a deeper level of contemplation in which God himself can be experienced fully, even though on earth he cannot be experienced physically.⁶

It was this knowledge of God beyond the body that was the goal of monastic contemplative exercises, including those of the Franciscans. Although true mystical union with God could be achieved only after death, Francis had come closer than any other human being to that full experience when he received the stigmata, and he achieved it through intense meditation on the crucified Christ. The practice of contemplation was also fundamental to the overall mission of the

³ The foundational study of somaesthetics is Shusterman, 'Somaesthetics', pp. 299–313; for a recent art historical application of this framework in a later Franciscan context see Terry-Fritch, 'Performing the Renaissance Body', pp. 111–32.

⁴ See the discussion in Cook, 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁵ For Bonaventure's promotion of sensory experience and art as steps toward God see Bychkov, 'The Place of Aesthetics', p. 197.

⁶ See La Nave, 'Bonaventure', pp. 159–73.

Franciscan Order; as Bonaventure stated, the Order was to create a 'church of contemplatives', in which that traditionally monastic practice was encouraged even in the laity.⁷ Accordingly, fueled by the friars' desire to promote a vibrant contemplative life for themselves and their followers, I contend that Cimabue planned his murals at Assisi with sensory engagement in mind. As I will argue below, the transept murals engaged the friars' senses in a fully immersive, imaginative experience mirroring the meditational practices promoted by the Franciscans.

In this chapter, I will focus on the decoration of the north and south transepts, for it is in these two complementary cycles that Cimabue's attention to the viewer's sensorial experiences emerges most clearly. Before moving to a discussion of the senses, however, a reminder of the murals' context is in order. In the north transept, Cimabue painted the miracles and martyrdoms of the Apostles, and in the south transept he illustrated Saint John's Apocalypse (see Appendix 1). Each transept also has a large crucifixion mural on its east wall that served as an altarpiece. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the themes chosen for the decoration of the transepts of the Upper Church at Assisi align with the altar dedications in those spaces; the north transept altar was dedicated to the Apostles and the south transept altar to Saint Michael. Although the altar dedications were in place prior to Cimabue's arrival at Assisi, the choice to focus on certain episodes concerning the Apostles and Apocalypse reflected a timely agenda on the part of the Franciscan Order. Chiara Frugoni has argued that the transept and apse imagery specifically recalls the formative days of the Franciscan Order in its references to the Porziuncola, the church dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the valley below Assisi that had been the Franciscans' first home.⁸ More will be said about the Franciscans at Assisi and the memory of the Porziuncola in Chapter 4, and I will discuss further below some of the ways that the themes of the end of time and of the apostolic life were especially relevant to the formation of the Order. I contend, further, that the unusual choice of scenes from within these larger biblical and apocryphal narratives worked in concert with Cimabue's intentional evocation of the senses.

Despite their novelties and their central position at the liturgical heart of the motherhouse of the Franciscan Order, Cimabue's murals remain understudied. Past scholarship tended to focus on one or the other transept, not the two together, and much of the literature was written thirty or more years ago. Irene Hueck, Yves Christe, Iole Carlettini, and Augusta Monferini, for example, probed the liturgical and exegetical meanings of the Apocalypse images.⁹ The Apostles scenes and their links to Roman painting and politics of the late thirteenth century have been explored by Hans Belting, Maria Andaloro, Serena Romano and Herbert L. Kessler.¹⁰ Belting concluded that the overall theme of the Upper Church transepts is the church triumphant; the north transept Apostles scenes represent the earthly church and the Apocalypse scenes indicate the celestial church.¹¹ Charles Mitchell, Rosalind Brooke, and Donal Cooper and Janet Robson remain the only Anglophone scholars to have written about Cimabue's Upper Church mural cycle as a whole, but all do so primarily to foreground discussions of the Saint Francis cycle.¹² Most recently, Chiara Frugoni provided the most in-depth reading of all of Cimabue's Upper Church murals to date, combined with close readings of Franciscan literary sources. And yet her analysis too is framed within a larger study on the Upper Church decoration as a whole.

Attention has not been paid, however, to the reception of the murals in terms of the space's multiple functions. As I noted in Chapter 1, Pope Nicholas III was a distant patron, and thus the

⁷ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 99.

⁸ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 119–26, and Frugoni, 'L'ombra della Porziuncola', pp. 345–93.

⁹ Hueck, 'Cimabue und das Bildprogramm', pp. 279–324; Christe, 'L'apocalypse', pp. 157–74; Monferini, 'L'apocalisse', pp. 25–55; Carlettini, 'L'apocalisse', pp. 105–28 and Carlettini, 'Gli angeli', pp. 255–67.

¹⁰ Belting, *Die Oberkirche*, p. 93; Andaloro, 'Ancora una volta', pp. 143–81; Romano, *La Chiesa*, pp. 101–27; Kessler, 'Old Saint Peter's', pp. 75–96.

¹¹ Belting, *Die Oberkirche*, pp. 61–67.

¹² Mitchell, 'The Imagery', pp. 120–23; Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 82–87; Brooke, *The Image*, pp. 356–58.

friars in the Sacro Convento and Cimabue must have been the primary decision makers when it came to the details of the commission.¹³ The friars were also the most regular viewers of these works in this space. At the time Cimabue painted his murals, a masonry barrier likely separated the nave from the friars' choir and the transepts, creating distinct spaces for the friars and laity.¹⁴ The surviving altar blocks placed in front of the crucifixion murals in each of the transepts suggest that those paintings served as altarpieces for the celebration of conventional Mass (see Fig. 2.16).¹⁵ Because of the limited number of choir stalls in the apse, some of the friars could have sat on benches in the transepts, facing Cimabue's crucifixion altarpieces.¹⁶ In addition to its obvious liturgical functions, the transept decoration might also have complemented the Sacro Convento's didactic exercises. The narrative scenes invite a progressive reading that encourages one to move chronologically through the stories. As has been argued for other mendicant choir spaces, acts of prayer, meditation, and/or instruction could have taken place in the Assisi transepts.¹⁷

This area of the church also served as a gathering place for the friars during General Chapter meetings, when leaders of the Order traveled to Assisi. These were intended to be held twice yearly, during the feasts of Saint Michael and Pentecost, occasions commemorated in the altar dedications as well as the related themes of the Apocalypse and the Apostles in the transept murals. By the time Cimabue was painting, however, General Chapter meetings were being held only every three years at Pentecost, roughly alternating between northern Europe and Italy. Irene Hueck suggested that Cimabue's murals may have been completed in time for the 1279 General Chapter meeting at Pentecost, and that the Upper Church was the only space large enough to accommodate the visiting friars during liturgical celebrations.¹⁸ Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 1, members of the laity probably had access to this area at times. Laypeople, including women, therefore most likely did enter the transepts, although less frequently than the friars did. Thus, although designed primarily by and for the friars, the decoration of this space could have served a public function as well, advertising the friars' way of life and promoting key tenets of Franciscan spirituality.

This chapter seeks to understand the multifaceted ways the friars and members of the public may have responded to the theological messages of the murals as well as their potential promotion of spiritual transformation. Significant for the notion of the reception of Cimabue's paintings is the transepts' focus of the friars' *vita mixta*, the innovative approach to the spiritual life as pioneered by Francis. The Franciscans sought to combine the monastic practice of secluded prayer and contemplation with service to the larger world via preaching and charity. They merged the traditional *vita contemplativa*, or contemplative life of prayer, with the *vita activa*, or active life of service in the world. In this *vita mixta* or *vita apostolica*, the friars sought to return to the spiritual life lived by Christ and his Apostles.¹⁹ Although the Franciscans were not the only group to embrace the *vita mixta*, the centrality of their *vita apostolica* was asserted most emphatically during the decade in which Cimabue was painting at Assisi. The mendicant orders had been sharply criticized by a number of bishops and clergy members who objected to their interference within established church practices. At the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, Pope Gregory X defended the mendicant

way of life and argued for their place within the church, citing specifically their blend of the two ways of the spiritual life: 'If you lived as they live and studied as they study, you would have the same success. They perform, at the same time, the roles of Mary and Martha. Like Mary they sit at the feet of the Lord, and like Martha they do everything to serve him'.²⁰ In Christian exegesis, the biblical figures of Mary and Martha, two close followers of Christ, signaled the two avenues of the spiritual life. Mary, who in the biblical account sat listening to Christ's teaching while her sister Martha busily prepared a meal for him, was emblem of the *vita contemplativa* and Martha the *vita activa*. Francis himself had practiced this twofold spirituality; as Bonaventure described in the *Legenda maior*, Francis '...had so prudently learned to divide the time given to him for merit, that he spent some of it working for his neighbor's benefit and dedicated the rest to the tranquil excesses of contemplation'.²¹ At Assisi, the transept murals' celebration of the *vita mixta* therefore advertised and defended the friars' twofold vocation to anyone visiting the church.

Beyond their effectiveness as propaganda, Cimabue's paintings were also, I contend, intended to instruct the friars in the ideal practice of the *vita mixta* via appropriate biblical exegesis and the promotion of the Apostles as role models. While both arms of the transept feature imagery that is relevant to the *vita mixta*, there are different, deliberate emphases in the north and south transept spaces. Cimabue and his patrons chose and crafted the Apostles scenes to underscore the friars' *vita activa*, or active life of preaching and outward mission, via their iconographic emphasis on the miracles and martyrdoms of Peter and Paul. The Apocalypse cycle instead more closely addresses the friars' *vita contemplativa* via its presentation of a mystical vision. Both sides of the transept promote specific role models for the friars in the figures of John the Evangelist, and, as Chiara Frugoni has pointed out, Peter and Paul.²² As I will discuss further below, the presence of these role models indicates an essential point about the Franciscan promotion of the *vita mixta*. For the Franciscans, the practice of contemplation was always privileged and seen as a necessary prerequisite to good works of the *vita activa*. This insistence on contemplation can be seen in the way the Franciscan emphasized hermetic retreat.²³ It is further emblemized in Francis' hagiography; his biographers detail his constant need to remove himself to the wilderness for prayer, including his ascent to Mount LaVerna that culminated in his stigmatization.²⁴ Therefore, role models like the apostles and Francis were, first and foremost, contemplatives. It within this emphasis on contemplation that a viewer's sensory engagement becomes crucial. The friars would have been encouraged to contemplate the scenes they viewed actively, using their bodily senses to help them ascend to higher levels of meditation, as modeled by Francis and as prescribed by Bonaventure. In the Assisi transepts, the choice of subjects, elucidated through Cimabue's compositional and iconographic innovations, would have facilitated a viewer's immersive, imaginative participation in the events depicted. The process of inserting oneself into these narratives began with the overall visual experience of the space itself.

Sensory Overload: Experiencing Place and Space

¹³ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 151 disagrees, says the pope or his agent, not the Franciscans or the provincial ministers, were in charge of the commission.

¹⁴ For a hypothesis as to this screen, see Hueck, 'La basilica', pp. 49–50.

¹⁵ Restoration work carried out after the 1997 earthquake, in which the choir stalls that currently line the transepts were removed, confirmed that choir stalls were not originally placed against the walls there, as they were in the apse. Cimabue painted fictive textiles there, which are absent in the apse, indicating that choir stalls were originally placed in that space. Other members of the community and perhaps important visitors such as the pope, whose throne is the centerpiece of the apse, would have sat closer to the high altar. See Cooper

and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 61–63; White, *Birth and Rebirth*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Hueck, 'La Basilica', 52.

¹⁷ See Cignoni and Flora, 'Requirements', pp. 61–76 and Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 147–52.

¹⁸ Hueck, 'La Basilica', p. 46. For further discussion of the Upper Church decoration in relation to General Chapter meetings see Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 192–93.

¹⁹ For discussion and bibliography on the Franciscans and the *vita mixta* see Erhardt, 'The Magdalen as Mirror', pp. 36–37, note 31.

²⁰ Quoted in Moorman, *A History*, pp. 177–78.

²¹ Bonaventure, *LM* 13:1, in FAED, p. 630.

²² Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 74.

²³ See the discussion in Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 190–91.

²⁴ Bonaventure, *LM* 13:1, in FAED, p. 630.

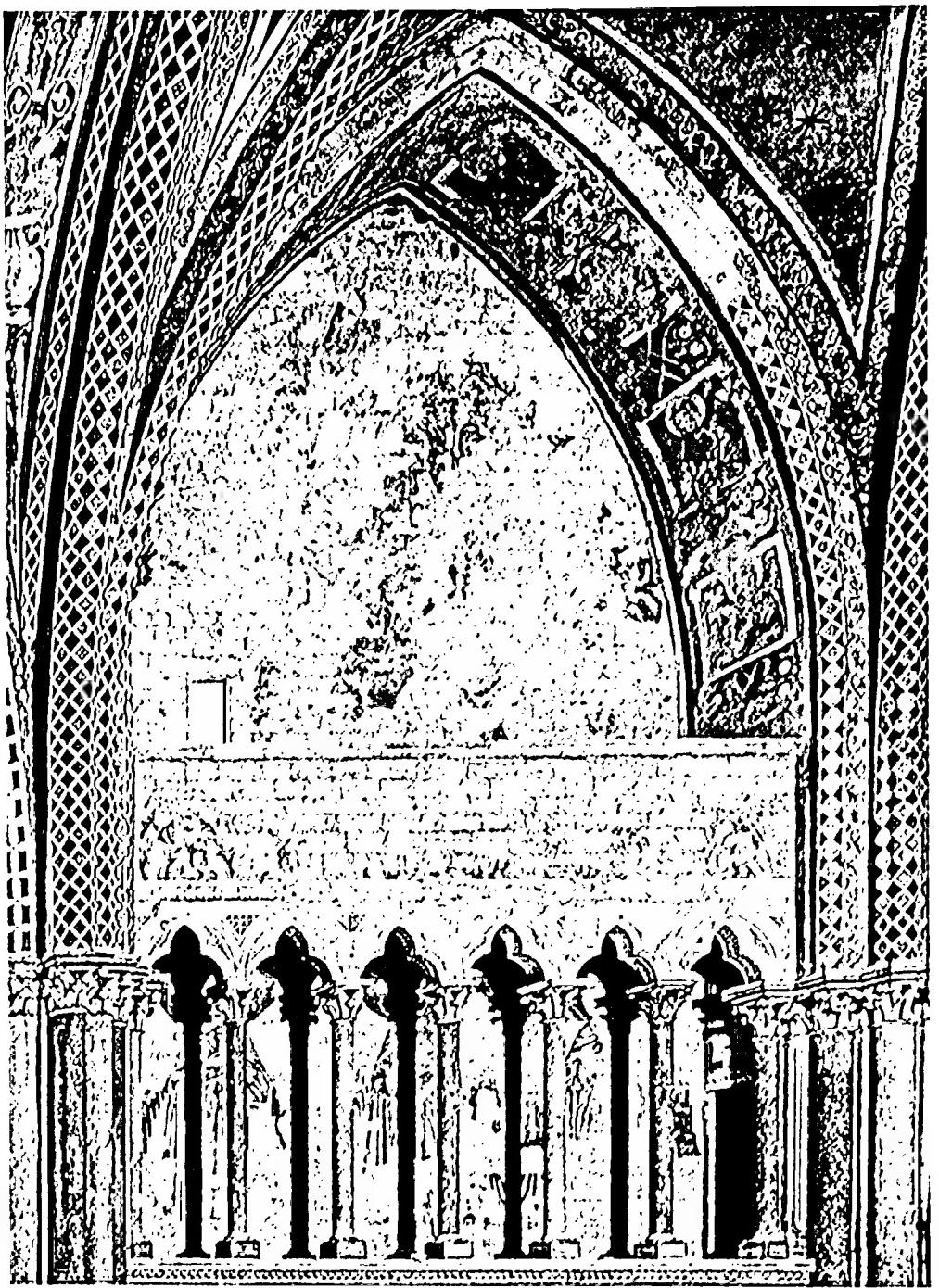


Fig. 2.2: Cimabue, Lunette and Triforium, south east wall of south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

presented on the walls, aspects of the overall decorative scheme would immediately activate one's senses. The transept features a profusion of patterns and colourful decorative details such as fictive marble and floral motifs (Fig. 2.1). In the two transept vaults as well as the rib vaults above the apse, gilded stars shimmer on rich azurite backgrounds, evoking the heavens. Every wall surface is covered with paint, from the elegant ribs supporting the vaults to the bundled columns clustered in the corners.²⁵ Even the undersides of the lobed triforium arches are painted with intricate diamond motifs evoking the inlaid marble of cosmati work and echoing the real cosmati work on the high altar. Although their brightness is much faded, as discussed in Chapter 1, we can imagine how

²⁵ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 154, noted this fact, and the preference for painting over other media at Assisi, positing that the

profusion of painted decoration was a 'compromise' and 'evidently more humble than mosaic or sculpture'.



Fig. 2.3: Cimabue, Triforium, north east wall of south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

striking the overall effect of the colours, patterns, and textures once was. As Beth Mulvaney put it, standing in the Upper Church, '... a sensate being submits to the dynamic relationship between the painted imagery and the spectator'.²⁶

In addition to this general visual sensory stimulation, pictorial quirks that at first seem puzzling can be understood in terms of the need to alert the viewer to his or her physical place within the space. An example of Cimabue's prompting of the viewer's spatial awareness can be seen in a comparison of the blind arcades on the east walls of the transepts that form a sort of triforium (Figs 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4). In the north transept, painted by the northern European workshop that had preceded Cimabue, standing figures of Apostles are painted on the wall behind the arches, each arch more or less framing a single figure (Fig. 2.4).²⁷ This arrangement recalls the standing sculpted figures placed in niches on church facades, particularly in northern Europe. Inside the Basilica at Assisi, where figural sculpture is absent, the layering of the painted figures behind the arches hints of their placement in real space, an effect reinforced by the way the feet of the figures point downward, breaking the ground line beneath them. Such a presentation asserts the physicality of the figures, provoking a sense of their actual presence in the recessed space of the triforium. While this sculpture-like positioning of figures behind a Gothic arcade in itself is no novelty, Cimabue's riff on the same idea in south transept is (Fig. 2.3). Here, rather than paint a single figure behind each arch, Cimabue paints three sentinel angels on the wall, with no regard for the arcade in front of them.²⁸ Doing so allows for a more impressive, monumental figure type, giving the angels the chance to spread their wings, so to speak. But if one faces the triforium head on, however, the faces of two of the angels are totally covered by the column in front. Cimabue must have taken into account the fact that no one would actually view these figures from that angle; unlike our modern photographs taken from scaffolding, viewers would see the angels from below, and in most cases, view them obliquely as they moved into the transept. One must move within the space in order to see each angel in its entirety. This presentation of the angels in a manner seemingly at odds with

²⁶ Mulvaney, 'Standing on the Threshold', p. 84.

²⁷ The figures on either end of the row of six apostles are placed slightly inward, not directly underneath the arch, possibly due to the placement of doorways on either end of the triforium wall.

²⁸ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 179–81, discusses the differences in the paintings surrounding the triforia, contrasting the northern workshop's work with that of Cimabue, but without raising the issue of presence.

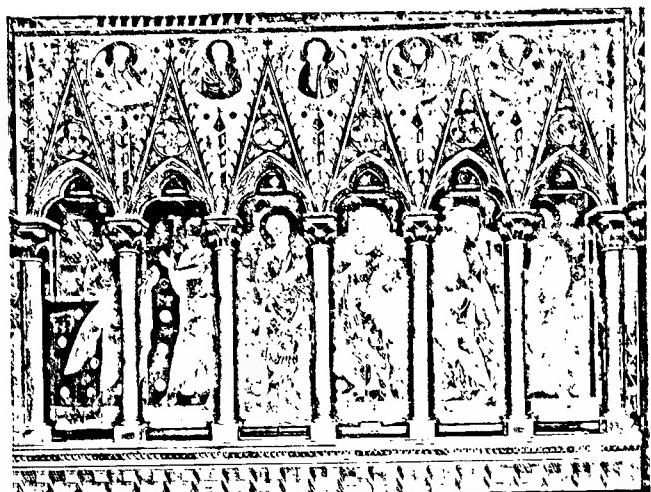


Fig. 2.4: Northern European painters, Apostles, Triforium, north west wall of north transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis Assisi.

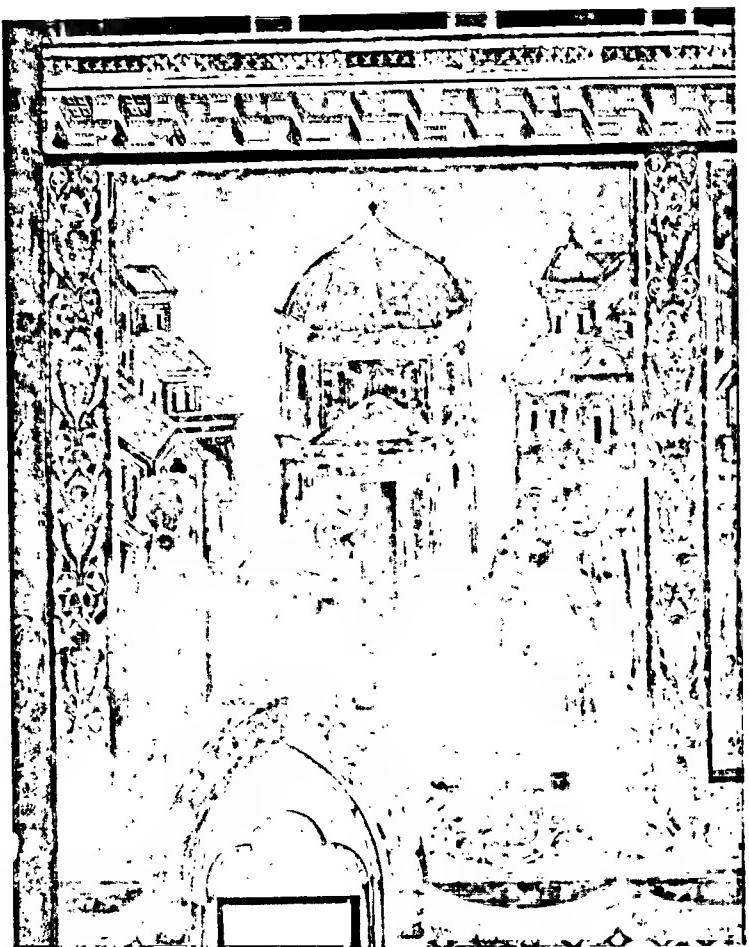


Fig. 2.5: Cimabue, *Peter Healing the Disabled*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

the architectural framework ignites an awareness in the viewer of his or her position in relation to these figures.

A similar effect is achieved via the fictive painted corbels that frame each scene on the lower walls of the transept and apse, as seen for example in the scene of Peter Healing the Disabled (Fig. 2.5). These are placed at the top of the murals, creating a *trompe l'oeil* effect of a coffered ceiling being held up by classicizing corbels with volutes and acanthus leaves. These corbels are continued throughout the lower walls of the Upper Church, including in the Saint Francis cycle in the nave, and scholars have repeatedly noted the ‘unifying’ effect they have on the entire decorative programme.²⁹ Throughout the Upper Church, these corbels are foreshortened against the picture plane with their diagonals pointing downward. The diagonals point either to the right or to the left depending on their placement towards the right or left edge of the entire wall. A single corbel at the very centre is presented frontally, without a foreshortened side, indicating the shift in visual position to the alternate diagonal, as can be seen most clearly in the nave frescoes depicting the life of Francis (Fig. 2.6). This approach has the effect of leading the eye inward towards the middle of the composition in a manner akin to Renaissance one-point perspective.

Although this presentation of the corbels does unite the entire Upper Church mural programme to a degree, no scholar has yet explained how Cimabue’s employment of this motif has a very different effect than that seen in the nave. There is a disjunction between the way perspectival effects are approached in the corbels and in Cimabue’s murals directly below them. Cimabue often presents the foreshortened architectural elements in his compositions with their diagonals reaching upwards and outwards, as exemplified in the abovementioned scene depicting Peter Healing

²⁹ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 159.



Fig. 2.6: Saint Francis Master or Giotto, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Francis*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

the Disabled (Fig. 2.5). John White, the only author to analyze closely Cimabue’s approach to perspectival effects, called this the ‘foreshortened frontal’ apparatus.³⁰ This construction causes the eye to move from the centre to the edges of the composition rather than in the opposite direction, working in what has been termed ‘reverse perspective’.³¹ Thus, while the corbels might create the sense of the viewer looking back into space, Cimabue’s foreshortened frontal compositions instead project the figures into the viewer’s space. The potential significance of this perspectival inversion will be discussed further below, but for now I want to note how the opposing perspectival effects of the corbels and the scenes in Cimabue’s murals challenge the viewer in the transepts to question his or her position within the space, much in the way that we saw Cimabue use the angels in the triforium to provoke a sense of displacement.

It is notable that the murals of the Saint Francis cycle in the nave, where the corbel motif continues, much more closely match their perspectival effects within the images themselves (Fig. 2.6). This synchronization heightens the sense of the viewer approaching the images as though crossing a threshold, an effect further enhanced by the addition of fictive coffered ceilings but within the scenes (not just above), as well as the twisted columns between the scenes that connect to the corbel decoration, creating an illusionistic loggia.³² Both Cimabue and the Saint Francis master (or Giotto) therefore invite the beholder to consider his or her position in space in relation to the scene.³³ But where the Saint Francis master invites the viewer to cross over the threshold and enter the scene, Cimabue effectively eliminates that threshold in his compositions. Scholars have often read Cimabue’s contrasting use of perspectival strategies as an unsuccessful attempt at and/or a step towards Renaissance perspective; I instead see this as part of Cimabue’s stimulation of the viewer’s own awareness of his or her position within the space.³⁴ In framing the scenes with fictive corbels depicted from the opposite foreshortened viewpoint, a visual rupture occurs. At first seemingly

³⁰ White, *The Birth and Rebirth*, pp. 25–26 and 105. For a more recent discussion of the use of reverse perspective in the Byzantine tradition see Antonova, *Space, Time and Presence*, pp. 29–62; p. 169.

³¹ Bokody discusses Cimabue’s use of this device only briefly; see *Images-within-Images*, pp. 38–39.

³² Mulvaney, ‘Standing on the Threshold’, pp. 86–88.

³³ On perspectival devices in the Saint Francis cycle and their role in manipulating the viewer’s circulation within the space, see Benton, pp. 37–43.

³⁴ This view still informs recent studies; see Bokody, p. 38, who writes that ‘The fictive architectural framing of the choir and the transept ... marks perhaps the beginning of the entire realistic turn in Italy as well’.

invited to view the events depicted in the murals as though looking through a window, the reverse perspective employed in the scenes instead creates the opposite effect: the scene is thrust into the viewer's space. It is in this deliberate manipulation of spatial effects that we see Cimabue's attempt to challenge the viewer to see the murals in a way that demands active, bodily participation.

The transept murals therefore invited somaesthetic performance, that is, an even deeper engagement of the senses via an awareness of one's body in relationship to the paintings.³⁵ The potential for one to consciously occupy and move in the space while viewing the sequence of murals would enhance the feeling of being physically present both at the events of one's own time and in sacred history.³⁶ Understanding Cimabue's use of framing devices and perspectival effects in these terms paves the way for a new understanding of the compositions and iconography of the murals themselves.

The Senses and the *Vita Mixta* in the North Transept Apostles Scenes

The innovative compositional devices employed by Cimabue in the Assisi transepts set the stage for his equally inventive iconographic schemes. Before exploring the themes of the murals, however, we must understand the preexisting decoration and Roman precedents that shaped Cimabue's work in the north transept. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the murals in this area of the transept were initiated by painters from northern Europe, who painted the upper portions of the walls, including the Majesty image in the western lunette, the Transfiguration image in the opposite lunette, the standing figures of apostles flanking the windows and painted in the blind arcades, and the roundels with bust-length angels.³⁷ Cimabue executed the five Apostolic scenes and the large crucifixion on the lower walls. The emphasis on Peter in the north transept has long been cited as evidence for the close connections between Assisi and Rome, so close in fact that the imagery in this area has been called propaganda for the papacy.³⁸ The pairing of Peter and Paul in the north transept is in conscious emulation of Roman basilicas, particularly Old St Peter's. As Herbert L. Kessler has noted, now-lost mosaics featuring narratives from Peter's life, executed before c. 800, decorated the same area of Old St Peter's, the north transept.³⁹ There was in fact a tradition of situating Petrine narratives in the right transept of churches in Italy, especially in Rome, so the placement of these scenes at Assisi reflects earlier models.⁴⁰ The choice of subjects, particularly those on the north transept wall, may also be related to the lost portico frescoes at Old Saint Peter's, which also featured the subjects of the Death of Simon Magus and the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul. The portico frescoes were possibly commissioned by Nicholas III between 1277–80, at the same time Cimabue was painting at Assisi. The executions of Peter and Paul are likewise represented in the Sancta Sanctorum, commissioned too by Nicholas III. The papal connections here are clear and especially appropriate because Assisi was designated a papal chapel. The pairing of Peter and Paul and the cycle's specific Roman visual references, to be discussed further below, would certainly have advertised papal power to anyone visiting the church.

³⁵ Terry-Fritsch uses the term 'body-mindfulness', but because the concept of 'mindfulness' has a certain meaning in twenty-first century popular discourse, I prefer to discuss Cimabue's murals in terms of the viewer's awareness.

³⁶ This process is akin to Antonova's discussion of reverse perspective and concepts of time in Byzantine icons, see Antonova, pp. 29–62. On mural paintings, space, and the moving spectator see Lakey, 'From Place to Space', pp. 113–36.

³⁷ Binski, 'How Northern', pp. 73–138.

³⁸ Romano, *La Basilica*, p. 115.

³⁹ Kessler, 'Old St Peter's', p. 194.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the Roman precedents for Cimabue's Apostles cycle see Romano, *La Basilica*, pp. 120–27, who also notes, importantly, that Cimabue's cycle departs in many ways from these precedents.

The popes rarely visited Assisi, however, and on a daily basis the Apostolic scenes were mostly viewed by the friars. My reading of the Apostles cycle therefore departs from those of previous scholars in underscoring how the iconographic programme could be understood by the community in residence at Assisi. Although Cimabue may have been indebted to earlier or contemporary Roman iconographic models, his murals depicting the apostolic acts can nonetheless be read as a promotion of and instruction in the *vita mixta* of the Franciscans. Peter's acts of healing and exorcism mark him as model of the *vita activa*, while the figures of John and Paul underscore the importance of the *vita contemplativa*. In the following discussion, I will take the place of a friar within the space, progressing through the Apostolic cycle chronologically. I will examine each mural in terms of its exegetical content while layering in considerations of how Cimabue's compositions promoted a viewer's sensory engagement. The Apostles scenes at Assisi are where we see Cimabue at his most innovative in his experiments with perspectival effects, and as previously mentioned, these can be seen as an attempt to raise awareness in the viewer of the position of his or her body in space in relation to the image. Cimabue's frontally oriented compositions seek to break down the barrier between the picture plane and the viewer. This presentation of the scenes would encourage interactive viewing, prompting the friars to imagine themselves witnessing and participating in the scenes in front of them, mentally joining the Apostles in their exemplary acts of the *vita apostolica*.

The Apostles in Action: Moving through Mendicant Life

The Apostolic narratives begin on the northwest wall of the transept with the scene of Peter Healing the Disabled (Fig. 2.5). The narrative corresponds to the biblical account in the book of Acts:

Now Peter and John went up into the temple at the ninth hour of prayer. And a certain man who was lame from his mother's womb, was carried: whom they laid every day at the gate of the temple, which is called Beautiful, that he might ask alms of them that went into the temple. He, when he had seen Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked to receive alms. But Peter with John fastening his eyes upon him, said: Look upon us. But he looked earnestly upon them, hoping that he should receive something of them. But Peter said: Silver and gold I have none; but what I have, I give thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise, and walk. And taking him by the right hand, he lifted him up, and forthwith his feet and soles received strength. And he leaping up, stood, and walked, and went in with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God. And they knew him, that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple: and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened to him. And as he held Peter and John, all the people ran to them to the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly wondering.⁴¹

In Cimabue's mural, Peter, at the centre of the composition, strides forward, taking the hand of the lame man, while John stands looking on at left. The lower portion of the painting is extremely damaged, but one can make out a second seated figure behind the cripple, possibly another beggar. A crowd of bearded men stands to the right, expressing astonishment at the scene. These are the 'men of Israel' whom Peter in the following passage in Acts holds responsible for the death of Christ. They resemble the bearded figures placed to the right of the viewer in Cimabue's crucifixion scene in the south transept, whom Chiara Frugoni has identified as the Jews.⁴²

⁴¹ DRB, Acts 3: 1–11.

⁴² Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 107.



Fig. 2.7: Cimabue, *Peter Healing the Sick and Demon Possessed*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

As other scholars have noted, the friars perhaps chose this story for inclusion in the transept because it offered lessons on mendicant life, such as voluntary poverty. The cripple begs for alms, but Peter states explicitly that he has no ‘silver and gold’, a point relevant to the strict Franciscan prohibition against the friars’ handling of money.⁴³ Instead, like Peter, the Lesser Brothers were called to perform their deeds of healing and charity without money, drawing upon the power of the name of God. Further, I would like to suggest that leading the Apostolic series off with this episode would immediately trigger an awareness of the senses and their power in the miraculous acts of the early followers of Christ. Sight and touch in particular are highlighted here. The biblical text states that Peter and John first looked at the crippled man, and demanded that he look back at them, as a prelude to his healing, ‘But Peter with John, fastening his eyes upon him, said: Look upon us’. For medieval Christians, sight was considered the most powerful and primary of the senses, fundamental to the pursuit of knowledge and a prerequisite to belief.⁴⁴ Vision was linked to faith in biblical exegesis; the cripple therefore is asked to ‘see’ before he is touched by Peter, and only then can he walk. The pairing of John and Peter in this story also reinforces the idea that sight and touch are emblematic sensorial aspects of the *vita mixta*. John, the visionary apostle who saw and recorded his vision of the Apocalypse, is frequently cited in Christian exegesis as a model of the *vita contemplativa*. Sight—including visionary capabilities that take the idea of sight beyond the physical—is therefore his purview, and accordingly, Cimabue presents the figure of John to the left of the composition, standing still with his gaze fixed firmly on the eyes of the lame man. Peter, as the Christ-appointed founder of the early Church, was instead emblem of the *vita activa*, associated with the work of one’s hands via touch. Cimabue’s mural thus shows Peter, in contrast to John, in motion, striding forward in the act of taking the cripple by the hand, lifting him up as he is physically healed.

In the scene of Peter’s healing of the lame man, and indeed throughout the transept mural cycle, Cimabue uses the architecture represented to structure and frame the composition, rendering the narrative boldly and precisely. Two sets of buildings with towers flank the scene on either side, while the hexagonal temple in the centre with its pediment and four-columned porch create a tripartite division of the composition. As elsewhere in the cycle, the diagonals of these buildings reach upwards to the outer frame of the image, effectively creating an inverted perspective that projects the figures towards the front of the picture plane. The world of the viewer and that of the Apostles becomes visually joined via the foregrounding of the figures in this way. The beholder therefore is again prompted to be aware of his or her own body in relation to the scene.⁴⁵ This sense of physical place is further enhanced by details Cimabue includes to identify the Temple specifically. The sacred site is presented as a hexagonal building with an onion-shaped dome and a pediment with four columns. Cimabue also includes an eagle depicted at the centre of the pediment, the Roman emblem Herod the Great mounted on the door of the Temple.⁴⁶ These details conform to those recounted by pilgrims to the Holy Land, and indeed Cimabue may have relied on such firsthand accounts in his attempt to enhance the authenticity of the scene.⁴⁷

To the right is another scene demonstrating Peter’s apostolic power, Peter Healing the Sick and Demon Possessed (Fig. 2.7) Here the image corresponds to the description in Acts chapter 5:

And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon’s porch. But of the rest no man durst join himself unto them; but the people magnified them. And the multitude of men and women who believed in the Lord, was more increased: Insomuch that they

⁴³ See the proscription in Francis of Assisi, *The Later Rule*, 4:1, in *FAED*, vol. 1, p. 102.

⁴⁴ See for example the discussion in Camille, ‘Before the Gaze’, pp. 197–223.

⁴⁵ Similar arguments are made for the use of reverse perspective in Antonova, pp. 29–62.

⁴⁶ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 89.

⁴⁷ Bokody, *Images-within-Images*, pp. 62–67.

brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that when Peter came, his shadow at the least, might overshadow any of them, and they might be delivered from their infirmities. And there came also together to Jerusalem a multitude out of the neighboring cities, bringing sick persons, and such as were troubled with unclean spirits; who were all healed.⁴⁸

The casting out of demons was an essential miraculous act to the *vita apostolica*, and thus the inclusion of the scene at Assisi again alludes to the friars' vocation.⁴⁹ A tripartite composition similar to that in the previous scene organizes the narrative. While his fellow disciples John, James, and a fourth apostle look on at left, Peter steps forward at the centre, a detail that delineates Peter as an active healer. The people who have come to be cured gather at right. Peter's ministry extends to all ages and both genders; among the crowd Cimabue also includes children, some of whom sit on the shoulders of their parents in order to get a look at Peter, and mothers with babies. The damaged mural makes it impossible to know whether Cimabue intended to depict Peter's shadow, in itself believed to have healing power according to the biblical text.

The figures are projected into the foreground via three foreshortened architectural elements framing the scene. Two groups of buildings are placed at left and right, and a vaulted baldacchino is at the centre, indicating Solomon's porch. The taller building in the group at left, with its coffered roof and hexagonal dome, resembles the Temple depicted in the previous mural. Rays of light emanate from the top left corner of the painting, indicating the power of the Holy Spirit, also indicated by the dove depicted in the pediment of the baldacchino, that descends to the apostles in their healing efforts.⁵⁰ The movement of the apostles and of divine power therefore mirrors that of the viewer's gaze as he or she would move from the first healing scene depicted to this one.

Also as in the previous episode, Peter is shown in the act of ministering to the multitude gathered before him. His right arm, elongated and central to the composition, is raised in a gesture of blessing, aimed at the members of the crowd who are being freed from the demons that have possessed them. The viewer witnesses the exact moment of exorcism, seeing the writhing demons emerge from the mouths of those they once plagued. In scenes of exorcism from this period, the mouth was typically shown as the point of exit for demons, a detail that also implies the sense of taste as an aspect of spiritual cleansing.⁵¹ The body is purified from the evil spirits via the mouth, the same body part used to taste the Eucharistic bread and wine, the substances of salvation served within this space of the church. The blessing gesture of Peter's right hand thus also echoes that of the priest who consecrates the Host. With Peter's left hand, he reaches towards that of a seated, young male figure, perhaps one who cannot walk, looking as though he will lift him up physically as in the previous episode. As Peter heals one group with one hand and performs the exorcism with his other one, his touch and his speech restore bodies as well as minds and spirits. Physical healings and spiritual ones are intimately connected, and now yet another sense is emphasized in the healing process: hearing. Unlike in the previous scene, John also now has his hand raised in a gesture of prayer, implying that he too has spoken his appeal to God aloud in his efforts to aid Peter. Seeing the Apostles' response to the crowd of beggars and babies, the viewer can easily imagine the cacophony of cries for help met by the prayers and commands of Peter and John.

The healing powers of the Apostles in these two scenes would also remind the friars of the miracles performed by Francis, who likewise used the senses of touch and hearing in his ministry. The Franciscans often compared Francis to Peter, both in terms of their roles as founders of religious movements and as healers.⁵² Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* recounts miracles of Francis that have

48 DRB, Acts 5: 12–16.

49 On the friars, the notion of the apostolic life and the casting out of demons, with its attendant issues in the thirteenth century see Newman, 'Possessed by the Spirit', pp. 733–70.

50 Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 93.

51 Begel, 'Exorcism in the Iconography', p. 344.

52 Kessler, 'Old Saint Peter's', p. 95.



Fig. 2.8: Cimabue, *Death of Simon Magus*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

direct parallels to those enacted by Peter as seen in the Assisi murals. In Toscanella, Francis cured the son of a knight who had been crippled since birth. Bonaventure's account quotes the text in Acts in which Peter healed the cripple at the Temple gate; Francis 'lifted child up with his hand', then the child began 'walking and leaping and praising God'.⁵³ In the same chapter of the *Legenda* we learn that Francis's commands also cast out evil spirits from those who were possessed.⁵⁴ Both in the *Legenda* and in the accounts of miracles in the book of Acts, these miraculous healings lead to new believers and converts. In this way, as it did for Francis, the *vita activa* intersects with the *vita contemplativa*; prayer is essential to the miraculous deeds of the apostles and to the ultimate success of their preaching and missionary efforts. For this reason, John and Peter, each representing these two modes of living the apostolic life, are paired in both images of healing on the west wall.

A similar pairing of models of active and contemplative lives is in the following mural in the series, *The Death of Simon Magus* (Fig. 2.8) the first of three scenes on the north wall of the transept. According to the biblical account in Acts, Simon was a sorcerer who converts and is baptized.⁵⁵ Simon then offers the apostles money in order to be granted the same miracle working powers they possess:

And when Simon saw, that by the imposition of the hands of the apostles, the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, Saying: Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I shall lay my hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said to him: Keep thy money to thyself, to perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast no part nor lot in this matter. For thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Do penance therefore for this thy wickedness; and pray to God, that perhaps this thought of thy heart may be forgiven thee. For I see thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bonds of iniquity. Then Simon answering, said: Pray you for me to the Lord, that none of these things which you have spoken may come upon me.⁵⁶

Again, this story is particularly relevant to the Franciscans because of its denunciation of money; the gifts of God cannot be bought, and the Apostles affirm devotion to poverty. But Cimabue's mural underscores the evils resulting from greed more drastically. The scene is drawn from the apocryphal account of the death of Simon found in the *Legenda aurea* written by the Dominican friar Jacobus de Voragine c. 1275, as well as the *Passio apostolorum Petri et Pauli*.⁵⁷ In this story, Simon joins the household of the emperor Nero, and claims to have Christ-like powers such as the raising of the dead. To prove his superiority over the Apostles in front of Nero, Simon throws himself off a high tower at the Capitol in Rome, flying through the air. Peter and Paul intervene to bring the magician crashing to his death. As the *Legenda aurea* relates, Paul says to Peter:

Paul said to Peter: 'I'm the one to pray now; you're the one to command!' ... Peter said to Paul: 'Raise your head and look!' When he looked up, he saw Simon flying and said to Peter: 'Peter, what are you waiting for? Finish what you've started, because the Lord is already calling us!' Then Peter said, 'I adjure you, angels of Satan, you who are holding Simon up in the air, I adjure you in the name Jesus Christ our Lord! Stop holding him up and let him fall!' They released him at once and he crashed to the ground, his skull was fractured, and he expired'.⁵⁸

The inclusion of this scene, also seen in other Petrine cycles in Rome and elsewhere, alludes to the Franciscans' efforts to fight heresy and reform the church. Simon, for whom the term 'simony' is named, was an emblem of church corruption, and also associated with the Antichrist. The placement of this scene across from the Apocalyptic narratives, in which the Antichrist is vanquished, is therefore important to the larger theme of the church triumphant in the transept.⁵⁹

Again, Cimabue and the friars chose a narrative in which the senses figure powerfully. In the book of Acts, the healing power of touch is what Simon covets; he asked the Apostles for the ability to 'lay hands' on people to effect healing. Sight is also fundamental to the apocryphal account of Simon's death. In it, Peter tells Paul to look up to see Simon flying, and then after seeing him, Paul commands Peter to act. Sight again prompts the miracle. Cimabue represents the two Apostles at the left of the composition, intimating the movement of the viewer from left to right as in the two previous scenes. While Paul kneels, his hands clasped in prayer, Peter stands, raising one hand towards the flying Simon while holding a scroll with his other hand. The sense of hearing is also implied as Peter seems to be speaking the command to Simon at this very moment, and the viewer witnesses the demon-besotted sorcerer just before he comes crashing down to earth. As did the two healing episodes on the west wall, the story of Simon's death demonstrates the dual power of the *vita mixta*. Paul's prayer combined with Peter's command produces the miracle, marking Paul here as example of the contemplative life and Peter of the active life.

The pious deeds of Peter and Paul stand in sharp contrast to the pride and greed evidenced by the figures of Simon and Nero in the same image. Once again Cimabue employs a tripartite compositional structure, with two architectural elements framing the scene on either side. At right, the Capitol in Rome is represented as a building with an inner courtyard surmounted by a dome-like vaulted loggia. At centre stands the tall tower, here rendered as open wooden scaffolding with a platform at the top that Simon has just used as a launching pad. Four winged demons seem to bear the sorcerer aloft, marking him as a type of the Antichrist, an association also made by Bonaventure.⁶⁰ Simon's pagan loyalties are indicated by the laurel wreath on his head and his classicizing tunic, elements that also connect him to the emperor Nero, who is shown seated on a throne at the right, holding a scepter and wearing elaborate armor. The grandiose emperor gestures towards the Apostles, passing upon them the judgment that would lead to their execution.

The *Death of Simon Magus* scene therefore sets up the narrative for the two successive murals: the Crucifixion of Peter (Fig. 2.9) and the Beheading of Paul (Fig. 2.10). In a spare composition, once again divided into three sections, Cimabue delineates the precise locale of Peter's crucifixion in Rome by depicting it directly between the *Meta Romuli*, the pyramid believed to be the tomb of Rome's founder, and Nero's funerary monument, known as the *Terebinthus*, here rendered as pyramidal structure topped by a plant with three stems. Cimabue must have based these details on descriptions of the city of Rome, such as that in the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, relating how Peter was crucified at a point exactly between these two monuments.⁶¹ Peter's martyrdom is not described in the book of Acts but is featured in a number of apocryphal texts and included in medieval hagiographic narratives such as the *Legenda aurea*. In these accounts, when his execution by crucifixion is ordered, Peter demands to be crucified upside down, claiming that he is unworthy of crucifixion in the same manner as Christ.⁶²

In some versions of the story, Peter is tied rather than nailed to the cross. Although the badly preserved mural makes it difficult to see whether Cimabue depicted nail marks in Peter's hands or feet, no ropes tying him to the cross can be seen, so he looks to be nailed to the cross rather

⁵³ Bonaventure, *LM* 12:9, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 627.

⁵⁴ Bonaventure, *LM* 12:10, in FAED, vol. 2, pp. 627–28.

⁵⁵ DRB, Acts 8:9–13.

⁵⁶ DRB, Acts 8:18–24.

⁵⁷ See *Acta apostolorum*, Prolegomena, pp. lxxv, and Jacobus de Voragine trans. Ryan, pp. 340–49. For discussion of the early sources on Simon Magus see Ferreiro, *Simon Magus*, pp. 55–82.

⁵⁸ Jacobus de Voragine trans. Ryan, p. 344.

⁵⁹ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 96; Binski, 'How Northern', pp. 92–95.

⁶⁰ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 96.

⁶¹ Master Benedict, *The Marvels*, p. 35.

⁶² Jacobus de Voragine trans. Ryan, p. 345.



Fig. 2.9: Cimabue, *Crucifixion of Peter*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.



Fig. 2.10: Cimabue, *Beheading of Paul*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.



Fig. 2.11: Unknown artists, *Crucifixion of Peter*, Sancta Sanctorum, Rome.

prepared for possible martyrdom, a reality at least for some via the Franciscan missions to the Levant in an age of the Crusades.⁶⁴

In Cimabue's depiction of Peter's death, the figures of the onlookers are placed in front of the two pyramids on either side, a spare compositional organization that puts the focus squarely on Peter's execution. Using the same reverse perspectival approach employed in the other scenes, Cimabue pulls the action in the story forward into the viewer's space. At left, a crowd has gathered in front of the *Meta Romuli*, including a bearded man with a sword who stands prominently in front, perhaps one of the executioners. At right, three young male saints are shown watching the martyrdom in front of Nero's *Terebinthus*.⁶⁵ The two men in the front of the group hold swords and are clearly shown wearing military armor. Two similar figures are shown in the same scene in the Santa Sanctorum, and have been identified as the saints Processus and Martinian. These men were guards at the Mamertine prison where Peter and Paul were incarcerated. The Apostles preached to them, and they became Christians. According to accounts of their conversion, Peter miraculously caused a spring to bubble up in the prison, and used the water to baptize the two men and others.⁶⁶ Processus and Martinian then set many of the prisoners free, were subsequently beheaded alongside the apostle Paul, and were later buried at Saint Peter's basilica in Rome.⁶⁷ As military saints, Processus and Martinian were regarded as emblems of the church militant, or the idea that the church on earth consists of members who fight against evil, a concept that was heavily promoted by the papacy in the thirteenth century. In 1278, Nicholas III issued a bull, *Fundamenta*

⁶³ Bonaventure, *LM* 9:9, in FAED, vol. 2, pp. 603–04.

⁶⁴ Burke, pp. 460–92.

⁶⁵ It is possible that a fourth figure is shown behind these three—what may be a halo can be seen in the background, but the damaged mural is not fully legible.

than tied to it. In the better preserved Santa Sanctorum in Rome, painted likely around the same time as Cimabue's Assisi cycle, the martyrdom of Peter is depicted, and the wounds inflicted by the nails in Peter's hands and feet are clearly visible (Fig. 2.11). The choice to depict nails in Peter's crucifixion in both contexts perhaps reflects the association of Peter with Francis. For the Franciscans at Assisi, even the wounds of Peter would have been an important reminder of Francis' stigmata. Although Francis sought martyrdom, he did not achieve it in the traditional sense as did Peter. Bonaventure makes it clear that Francis' receipt of the stigmata, however, was the equivalent of martyrdom, because Francis physically experienced Christ's suffering.⁶⁸ The martyrdom of Peter and Paul therefore are not included in the cycle at Assisi simply because of the Basilica's links to the papacy. Peter and Paul are also ultimate pious models of the apostolic life for the friars; the unwavering faith of Peter and Paul would challenge the friars to be

Ecclesiae Militantis, proclaiming Rome, the city where the Apostles died as martyrs, as the capital city of the church's spiritual warfare.⁶⁹

In Cimabue's version of the story, however, three saints are shown rather than two. In the Sancta Sanctorum, Processus and Martinian are depicted in front of a third figure, a bearded man holding a spear and shield and lacking a halo; perhaps he is the knight Paulin, who assigns the two saints to watch over Peter and Paul in prison and later orders the executions of the two newly-Christian guards (Fig. 2.11). This third figure could have been misinterpreted as a third saint in Cimabue's mural. Or, Cimabue's image may be related to other Roman versions of the story. A trio of saints at the crucifixion of Peter seem to have been included in the now-lost frescoes for the portico of Old Saint Peter's. The only surviving evidence for the paintings there are Grimaldi's seventeenth-century drawings of them, and in the scene showing Peter's death, three haloed figures are included, as in Cimabue's mural. Cimabue's three military saints might also derive from an anecdote found in apocryphal texts of the life and death of Saint Paul, in which three knights lead Paul to his death, but are converted by him on the way.⁷⁰ The deaths of Peter and Paul were linked in apocryphal literature and in the visual tradition, so there is a possibility that the stories of Processus and Martinian and the three knights became conflated. In any case, these figures remind the viewer of the power of Peter and Paul to convert even the vilest of pagans, yet another allusion to the success of their *vita mixta*.

The converted knights also link the scene of the crucifixion of Peter to the adjacent scene of the beheading of Paul, at right (Fig. 2.10). According to apocryphal texts, because he was a Roman citizen, Paul was martyred by the more humane method of beheading, rather than crucified. Cimabue's mural here is among the most damaged of the cycle; very little remains from the lower portion of the image in which the beheading of Paul was once depicted. The rocky landscape is more discernable, as is the large crowd of soldiers moving through the jagged hills to the site of Paul's martyrdom. At the bottom right of the composition, a portion of the detached head of Paul with its halo can be seen. The figure at the far right is the executioner, and the martyrdom takes place in front of a pine tree. This detail derives from early medieval apostolic legends; the sixth century *Acta Petri et Paulii*, for example, states that the site of Paul's martyrdom happened at an estate called Aquae Salviae near a pine tree.⁷⁰ In the contemporary image of the same subject in the Sancta Sanctorum, the trunk of the tree is placed between Paul's body and his newly detached head; Cimabue's version may have been similar. The Sancta Sanctorum image also shows two other details deriving from the Pauline legends that perhaps were also once visible at Assisi: milk and blood emerge from the body of Paul, and a stream of water is shown behind his severed head. Paul's head reportedly bounced three times, causing three springs to emerge from the ground. The abbey of Tre Fontane was erected on this spot in commemoration of this miracle. At the left of Cimabue's composition, the church-like structure, perhaps indicating the estate of the Aquae Salviae, or else the church built there during the medieval period, becomes yet another architectural reference adding specificity to the Roman setting. Again, recognizable details would help the viewer to imagine him or herself as an actual witness to the scene of execution.

The inclusion of Paul in Cimabue's mural cycle, emphasized in the narratives much less than Peter, has been considered something of an afterthought by some scholars, interpreted as a nod to Rome and the traditional twinning of Peter and Paul in Roman visual and literary traditions.⁷¹ Paul's presence, however, has important implications for the Franciscans at Assisi. Like John the

⁶⁸ For the bull, see Gay, *Les registres*, no. 296, pp. 106–08; see also discussion of the church militant in Deimling, p. 472.

⁶⁹ Jacobus de Voragine trans. Ryan, p. 353.

⁷⁰ Tajra, *The Martyrdom*, pp. 151–52. See also Eastman, *Paul the Martyr*, pp. 63–64. Several of these accounts describe how Paul's severed head bounced three times, causing miraculous

springs, the Aquae Salviae, to emerge from the rocks. According to tradition, the abbey of Tre Fontane in Rome marks this spot.

⁷¹ Romano, *La Basilica*, p. 114, for example, declares that the north transept is really about Peter but with the martyrdom of Paul added.



Fig. 2.12: Cimabue, *Crucifixion*, north transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Evangelist, as we have already seen, he was considered a model of the *vita contemplativa*. Paul's meditative experiences most closely mirrored those of Francis; Franciscan exegetes considered Paul's statement that he was 'crucified with Christ' an indication that Paul too received the stigmata. Paul was therefore another precursor to Francis. As Bonaventure states in the prologue of his *Itinerarium*:

There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified, a love which so transformed Paul into Christ that he could say: *With Christ I am nailed to the cross, I live now not I, but Christ lives in me*. This love also so absorbed the soul of Francis that his spirit shone through his flesh when for two years before his death he carried in his body the sacred stigmata of the passion.⁷²

The specific connection of Paul to Francis and to Christ's Passion is made visually at Assisi by the placement of his martyrdom next to the second large crucifixion scene Cimabue painted in the transept on the north east wall (Fig. 2.12). As in the better preserved crucifixion in the south transept, the stigmatized Francis is painted here at the foot of the cross (Fig. 2.13). A further connection between the north transept crucifixion and the martyrdom of Paul is the motif of the pine tree. Trees were key Christological symbols, allusions to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden as well as the Tree of Life whose wood legendarily became that used for Christ's cross.

⁷² Bonaventure, *Itinerarium*, Prologue, 3, ed. Boehner and Hayes, pp. 37–39.



Fig. 2.13: Cimabue, *Crucifixion*, south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

The Franciscans, most famously Bonaventure and Ubertino da Casale, used the metaphor of the tree in meditational treatises on Christ's Passion. Bonaventure's *Tree of Life*, in fact, begins with Paul's statement from Galatians about being nailed to the cross with Christ.⁷³ The scene of Paul's martyrdom would thus encourage the friars to emulate Paul in their fervent contemplation of Christ's death.

Although the scenes of martyrdom feature fewer of the specific sensorial references seen in the murals depicting the Apostles' acts of healing, the entire cycle promotes a somaesthetic sense of physical awareness of the viewer's position. It is telling that the series leads off with healing of the cripple, who then walks, just as viewers in the transept would as they moved through the transept, viewing the sequence. Then the viewer witnesses the healing and casting out of demons, an allusion to the physical and spiritual purification necessary to move forward on a spiritual journey. The third scene of healing relates to the discernment of truth and victory over the Antichrist. And then finally, the scenes of martyrdom demonstrate the ultimate heroic results of the Apostles' holiness. Sensorial references and compositional cues that move the viewer from left to right in the

⁷³ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life*, Prologue, 1, ed. Cousins, p. 119.

sequence would encourage a progressive absorption of the stories of apostolic prowess in both the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. These scenes would therefore inspire the friars to cultivate their own *vita mixta*, learning from the examples on the walls.

Affective Sensorial Experiences and Cimabue's Two Crucifixions

To the right of the scene of Paul's martyrdom, Cimabue painted a large-scale crucifixion scene on the east wall of the north transept (Fig. 2.12). A second crucifixion was painted in the same position on the other side of the transept on the south east wall (Fig. 2.13). Both of these are placed behind the altar blocks, and thus functioned as altarpieces for the two transepts.⁷⁴ With a greater monumentality than the other murals in each transept and without the framing device of the fictive corbels, the crucifixion scenes can be read independently. Serena Romano, however, pointed out that the two crucifixion scenes also work together to enhance the meaning of the rest of the transept scenes.⁷⁵ What has not been noticed is how the gestures and the selection of narrative moments illustrated in both crucifixion scenes point very specifically to multiple sensory experiences. Like the images surrounding them, the crucifixions would have invited the friars to imagine themselves witnessing Christ's death at precisely the same moment that they were observing the mystical transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist. The historical moment of Christ's execution therefore became fused in time and space with the manifestation of the substance of Christ's body within the Basilica. The friars could not just see Christ's sacrifice depicted on the walls, but also experience it with all of their senses as they participated in Mass. The taste and touch of the wafer and the wine, the smell of the incense, and the sound of bells and chanting made real the sight of Christ on the cross. To consider how these images may have functioned in this very physical performance of the liturgy, it is useful to consider each crucifixion in turn, thinking also about its links to the images surrounding it. The placement of the crucifixions within the transepts and in relation to the other murals is also a key consideration in thinking about how the friars would have approached these sacred images.

The north transept crucifixion (Fig. 2.12) is in a poorer state of preservation compared to that in the south transept, and in part for that reason it has also been considered artistically inferior. Understood in the context of Cimabue's other crucifixion and the adjacent Apostolic scenes, however, the north transept crucifixion offered an equally meaningful opportunity for empathetic contemplation of Christ's death. The two crucifixions are remarkably similar in the upper portions of their compositions. In both, Christ's body hangs limply on the cross and his eyes are closed. His loincloth is swept by a powerful wind, a natural force acting simultaneously upon sight, sound, touch, and hearing. The emphatic sway of Christ's torso to the left accentuates the way his loincloth becomes blown to the right. The same gust ruffles the robes of the flying angels swarming around the cross. As Barbara Baert has shown, the depiction of wind in late medieval art was a means of heightening the viewer's sensorial encounters with the divine.⁷⁶ The fluttering clothing on Christ and the angels also point to the frightening supernatural phenomena that occurred at the time of Christ's death according to the gospels: the rending of the veil of the Temple into two, the earthquake, and the rending of the rocks.⁷⁷ The flying angels, presented identically in both crucifixions, collect

⁷⁴ For discussion of these in the context of other mural altarpieces in the period see Bokody, *Images-Within-Images*, pp. 48–50.

⁷⁵ Romano, *La Basilica*, p. 88.

⁷⁶ Baert, 'Wild is the Wind', p. 240.

⁷⁷ DRB, Mark 15:37; Matthew 27:51–52.

blood from Christ's side and hands while other angels weep, gesturing in despair as they mourn his death. The gestures of the angels allude emphatically to the power of sight. Almost all of them, save for two angels at the perimeter of the composition, cover their eyes or turn away from Christ in horror and sorrow. One angel even manages to catch the blood flowing from Christ's side in a chalice while looking away, as two of his fellow angels gaze above Christ while likewise catching the blood flowing from his hands. The collection of blood is an obvious allusion to the Eucharist, which would be celebrated and consumed in front of the paintings. The onlookers at the viewer's left are mourners alongside the Virgin, while at right, the male figures instead are mocking Christ as per the biblical accounts.

The rest of the lower portion of Cimabue's north transept crucifixion differs from the composition the south transept crucifixion (Fig. 2.13). The subsidiary figures indicate that each side of the transept actually shows a slightly different moment in the Passion story. In the north transept, at the far left of Christ, the Virgin Mary is shown fainting, caught in the arms of her attendant female saints. As Amy Neff has shown, the gesture of the Virgin's swoon became a common feature in narrative crucifixion scenes. Exegetical texts postulate that Mary, having given birth to the Christ Child painlessly, felt the pangs of labor instead as her son was dying on the cross.⁷⁸ Mary's kinship to Christ is emphasized via her compassionate physical participation in his pain. It is clear that Christ is in the midst of this pain; the soldiers on either side of him wield the lance that would soon pierce his side and the spear holding the vinegar-soaked sponge proffered for him to drink. This is the moment just before Christ 'gave up the ghost', after drinking the vinegar.⁷⁹ The Roman centurion who pierces Christ's side with his lance is depicted at left, and is paired with the man who holds the sponge, named Stephaton in apocryphal texts.⁸⁰ Stephaton was considered by medieval exegetes to be a type of the Jews, faithless to Christ and responsible for his death. The cleanly-shaven face and Roman armor of the lance-bearer and the beard and shawl of the sponge-bearer clearly distinguish the contrasting ethnicities of these figures. Both gaze upwards at Christ, their instruments pointing towards him, directing the viewer's line of sight towards Christ's body.⁸¹

The lance bearer was frequently believed to be the Roman soldier who converted after witnessing Christ's death. Matthew's gospel relates that this centurion converted via sight: 'Now the centurion and they that were with him watching Jesus, having seen the earthquake, and the things that were done, were sore afraid, saying "Indeed this was the son of God"'.⁸² In medieval exegesis this centurion became conflated with the soldier who thrust the lance into Christ's side, and was eventually canonized and given the name Longinus. Cimabue seems to have kept the two figures separate, presenting the lance bearer in the north transept and Longinus in the south transept (Fig. 2.13). The *Legenda aurea* describes how Longinus had been blind, but the blood from Christ's side remained on the shaft of his spear and dripped onto Longinus' hands. The soldier then touched his eyes, and his sight was restored via Christ's blood.⁸³ In the south transept crucifixion, Cimabue refers to this healing miracle by presenting a small stick in the outstretched hand of the centurion, now difficult to see in this very damaged section of the painting. This detail could be the handle of the spear, which is held by the attendant figure behind the centurion, and thus the precise vehicle by which the salvific blood reached his eyes.

The restoration of Longinus' bodily vision also gives him the spiritual vision needed to recognize Christ's divinity. Blindness as a metaphor for unbelief was a common trope in Christian theology,

⁷⁸ Neff, 'The Pain of Compassio'.

⁷⁹ DRB, Matthew 27:48, Mark 15:36; John 19, 29–34, Luke 23: 36–37.

⁸⁰ On Stephaton see Bale, pp. 79–81. Frugoni was the first to identify the centurions in Cimabue's murals, see Frugoni, Quale Francesco, pp. 91–93, as well as Frugoni, *La voce degli immagini*, pp. 195–202.

⁸¹ For a discussion a similar use of compositional devices to direct the gaze of viewers of Crucifixion scenes, see Jung, pp. 87–88.

⁸² DRB, Matthew 27:54.

⁸³ Jacobus de Voragine, trans. Ryan, p. 32.

most famously in the conversion story of the apostle Paul, who was blinded by light on the road to Damascus. The centurion is therefore often interpreted an emblem of the conversion of non-Christians, a key goal of the Franciscan movement. Chiara Frugoni has recently suggested that the group of bearded men standing behind the centurion, some of whom, including the centurion himself, wear distinctive head coverings resembling the prayer shawl or tallit, represent the Jews.⁸⁴ Medieval Christian exegesis frequently compared the unbelief of the Jews to spiritual blindness, and their inclusion here thus further indicates the importance of vision in the process of conversion. Cimabue therefore presents Longinus as a reminder to the friars of bodily and spiritual vision as necessary components to faith.

The biblical account also underscores the idea that the centurion 'saw' the earthquake, a phenomenon often apprehended simultaneously via multiple senses. One thinks of feeling an earthquake in the sense of the earth moving, rather than just seeing it. Visual indications of the earthquake can in the south transept crucifixion be seen in the cracked rocks that reveal the skull of Golgotha at the foot of the cross. The shaking of the ground combined with a violent wind gust also whips Christ's loincloth in the direction of Longinus. Indeed, he almost seems to touch the edge of it with his outstretched hand. Touch is therefore another sense that is implied, calling to mind the healing power possible even in grasping Christ's clothing, as in the gospel account of the woman who was healed by touching Christ's garment.⁸⁵ On the other side of the cross, Mary Magdalene likewise seems to come close to touching the loincloth as she thrusts both hands into the air in despair. This reaching posture is expressed throughout her entire body; her bent knee shows her desire to stride upwards towards the cross. While it is a clear gesture of mourning, the outstretched arms of the Magdalene also call to mind images of the *Noli me tangere*, the moment described in the gospel of John in which she recognizes Christ after his resurrection. In this episode, Christ tells her, 'Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the father'.⁸⁶ Christian exegetes interpreted this admonition as a lesson on the use of the senses in faith; in this case the higher sense of sight is sufficient for Mary's belief. Mary Magdalene also became a model of transcending the senses via spiritual sight. Leo the Great, for example, commenting on the *Noli me tangere* encounter in a sermon, remarked that Mary Magdalene, like the Church, could apprehend Christ fully after his Ascension, when 'you shall grasp what you cannot touch and believe what you cannot see'.⁸⁷ Mary Magdalene was also revered by the mendicants as a model penitent and contemplative, and indeed such practices were essential to her salvation. The counter posed images of the centurion and the Magdalene thus make a clear statement about the importance of both corporeal and spiritual seeing in the processes of penance and conversion.⁸⁸

Although the prominent placement of Mary Magdalene and the centurion in Cimabue's south transept crucifixion underscores the emphasis on sight, it is notable that Saint Francis himself, shown kneeling just below the cross in both crucifixion scenes, is not looking at Christ at all (Fig. 2.14). Francis' placement here, clinging to the foot of the cross, became standard in the succeeding centuries.⁸⁹ In the iconographic tradition that follows, Mary Magdalene also becomes a figure shown as Francis is here, at the feet of the crucified Christ, and indeed the juxtaposition of his figure with hers here is telling. Like Mary Magdalene, Francis was a model penitent whose contemplative experiences were essential to his conversion and ministry. His kneeling form, hands clasped in prayer, resembles Byzantine depictions of donors or patrons in the posture of proskynesis, underscoring Francis' humility. And yet Francis' gaze seems to be directed either towards his stigmatized hands, upon which the blood of Christ has flowed, or the skull and bones revealed in the cleft rock below the

cross. The skull at the foot of the cross, which became a common motif in crucifixion scenes, refers to the place where the death of Christ took place, Golgotha, the place of the skull. Medieval legends also recounted how Adam had been buried at Golgotha, and that his son Seth planted a tree on his father's grave that later provided the wood for the cross. Francis' receipt of the wounds of Christ made him the literal embodiment of Christ's crucifixion, and thus the simultaneous contemplation of his own stigmata and the skull of Golgotha underscores his identification with Christ's suffering. But Francis' ocular focus away from the crucified Christ also implies that he has moved away from corporeal vision to spiritual vision. Via penance and contemplation, he is able to visualize the sufferings of the crucified Christ in his mind's eye, a state of mystical experience that was the ultimate goal of meditation in the monastic tradition. Francis at this point has effectively ascended the ladder of contemplation recommended by Bonaventure and achieved mystical union with God, literally imprinted on his body via the stigmata. Thus while Francis has superseded the world of the physical senses in some respects, he also embodies the ultimate spiritual sensory experience of the crucified Christ.

The figures of Francis and Mary Magdalene therefore offer models of the *vita contemplativa* for the friars who would have gathered in the south transept. Not only a model penitent because of her past sins, Mary Magdalene also came to symbolize the contemplative life. As previously mentioned, the biblical story of how she listened intently to Christ's teaching while her sister Martha busily attended to practical needs became a trope of the *vita mixta* for the mendicants: Mary representing the *vita contemplativa* and Martha the *vita activa*. In Cimabue's south transept crucifixion we find yet another model contemplative, John the Evangelist, who like Francis and Mary, is located at Christ's right. Rather than choose the more typical Byzantine presentation of John and the Virgin flanking the crucified Christ, here Cimabue has chosen the moment recounted in John's gospel in which the dying Christ gives John the Evangelist the care of his mother.⁹⁰ The pair joins their right hands just behind the Magdalene in a gesture resembling the Roman *dextrarum iunctio*, signaling an official 'contract' of adoptive mother and son-ship.⁹¹ This moment was also depicted in the earlier mural of Christ's Passion painted c. 1260 in the Lower Church by the Master of San Francesco, and it is significant that it is repeated by Cimabue in the south transept. It signals John's special relationship to Mary, and by extension, his special relationship to the Franciscans, who had also been 'adopted' by Mary, whom Francis made official protector of their order. That relationship is also commemorated by Cimabue in the Marian cycle of murals in the apse, in particular in the image of Mary and Christ enthroned (Fig. 2.15). As will be discussed further in Chapter 3, Mary extends her right hand towards the Franciscan friars who kneel at the right of her throne, indicating her special intercessory relationship with them. More importantly for the south transept imagery, the presentation of the moment of John's adoption links him specifically to Christ. Like Francis, John becomes aligned with Christ as he replaces Christ as Mary's son. In Christian exegesis John was also cited, like the Magdalene, as a model contemplative, and a particularly important one since he received the vision of the Apocalypse. The prominence of John in the south transept crucifixion therefore also links it to the adjacent Apocalypse imagery, which I will explore in greater detail below.

Thus the two crucifixion scenes thus offered the friars gathered for Mass slightly different narrative instances upon which to meditate. Both are also connected visually to the Apocalyptic



Fig. 2.14: Cimabue, Crucifixion (detail), south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

⁸⁴ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 107–09.

⁸⁵ DRB, Mark 5:25–34, Matthew 9:20–22, Luke 8:43–48.

⁸⁶ DRB, John 20:17.

⁸⁷ Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360374.htm>.

⁸⁸ [org/fathers/360374.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360374.htm).

⁸⁹ On Longinus see Viladesau, *Triumph of the Cross*, p. 105; Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, pp. 86–88.

⁹⁰ Romano, *La Basilica*, p. 88.

⁹⁰ DRB, John 19:26–27.

⁹¹ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 104.



Fig. 2.15: Cimabue, *Christ and Mary Enthroned*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

and Apostolic scenes near them. While we can understand the crucifixion scenes as altarpieces framing the celebration of Mass, what has not been considered before now is the importance of their placement within the church opposite the entrances to the convent, and the way that the murals could have been understood as the friars entered and exited the space. These doors are placed directly opposite the crucifixion scenes, allowing the friars entering the church a clear view of Christ's body before them (Fig. 2.16). As the friars stepped through these doors on the west walls, they would have had a direct view of the crucifixion scene on the opposite walls of the transepts. Such vistas would call to mind the longstanding Christian metaphor of Christ as door, derived from the gospel of John.⁹² Franciscan contemplative practices centred on the crucified Christ as the gateway to higher realms of spiritual seeing. In his *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure made clear the importance of Christ as the portal to divine contemplation:

⁹² DRB, John 10:9.

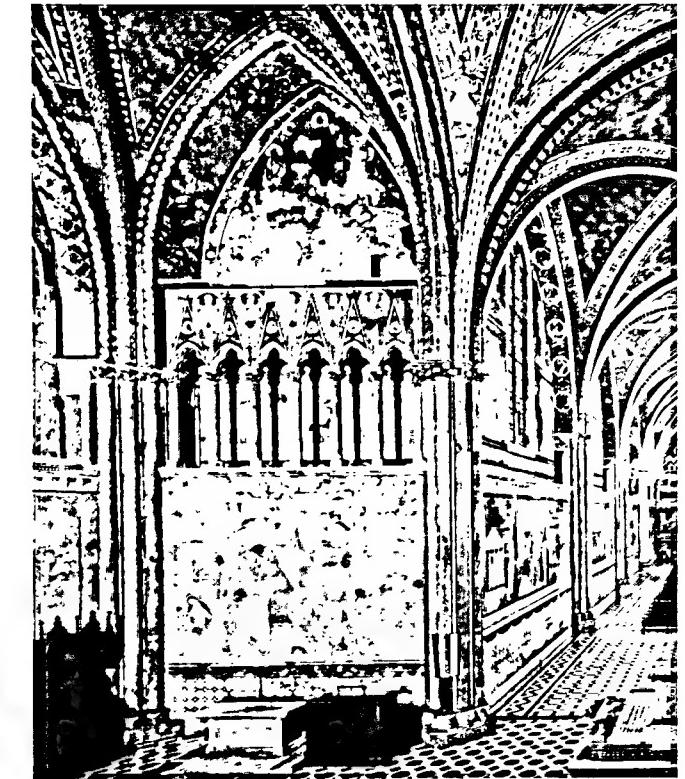


Fig. 2.16: View of Nave and Transepts from convent door facing east, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

The six wings of the Seraph, therefore, symbolize the six steps of illumination that begin from creatures and lead up to God, whom no one rightly enters except through the Crucified. For he who enters not through the door but climbs up another way is a thief and a robber. But if anyone enter through this door, he will go in and out and will find pastures (John 10:1–9). Therefore John says in the Apocalypse: Blessed are they who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb that they may have a right to the tree of life and may enter the city through the gates (Apocalypse 22:14). It is as if John were saying that no one can enter the heavenly Jerusalem by contemplation unless he enter through the blood of the Lamb as through a door.⁹³

Walking through the doors from the convent leads to Christ himself, marking the entrances as essential pathways on a Christian's contemplative journey.

Apostolic Vistas

The door as a metaphorical gateway to God is reiterated by the vista the friars would have when leaving the church to return to their convent. The original entrances to the convent, now covered by the choir stalls inserted there during the Renaissance, featured portals on each side of the transept with painted Gothic arches above them. Cimabue arranged his compositions around these fictive arches, which projects somewhat awkwardly into the scene. Cimabue, however, seems to have designed his paintings with this arch in mind; indeed his workshop even painted a decorated border around the arch, effectively widening it and causing it to occupy yet more real estate in the image above it. The arches intrude into Peter Healing the Disabled (Fig. 2.5) in the north transept and Saint

⁹³ Bonaventure, *Itinerarium*, Prologue, 3, ed. Boehner and Hayes pp. 37–39.



Fig. 2.17: Cimabue, *Saint John on Patmos*, south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

John on Patmos (Fig. 2.17) in the south transept. On either side of the transept, then, the key role models for the friars, Peter and John, are placed directly above the doors to the convent; it is almost as though the pointed arch points specifically to Peter and to John. Exiting the church, the friars would glimpse a final reminder of the emblems of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* on whom they were to model their spiritual lives.

The desire to connect the doors of the convent with the crucifixion images as well as these Apostolic figures may also explain why the scene of Saint John on Patmos is placed at the end of the Apocalypse cycle. In most narrative cycles of the Apocalypse from the thirteenth century, an image of John is presented first, functioning as something of an author portrait. The text of Apocalypse 1 is also where the setting of John's vision is mentioned, so one would expect to see Saint John on Patmos at the start of the cycle, rather than at the end, as it appears at Assisi.⁹⁴ To better understand this arrangement, let us first take a close look at the scene. An angel sits with one arm behind John and the other pointing towards the viewer's left. The two occupy a small, diamond shaped island amid a sea brimming with fish and other marine creatures. John reclines with knees bent in front of him, one elbow on one knee and his head seemingly leaning on his hand.

This gesture is seen in other images of John on Patmos, particularly in thirteenth and fourteenth century Apocalypse manuscripts, which were produced in northern Europe in great quantities.

The Dyson Perrins Apocalypse, made c. 1260 and now at the Getty is a representative example (Fig. 2.18). In these manuscripts, many times the angel visits the evangelist while he is asleep, while in others, his eyes are open, and the head in hand becomes instead a pensive stance. Cimabue portrays John with his eyes open; the angel's gaze meets John's as he points to the right, urging the apostle to 'look'. The manuscript tradition typically features a scene of John on Patmos as an illustration of Apocalypse 1, at the beginning of John's vision, and signals the visionary character of the text that follows. There is a clear separation between the world that John inhabits—indicated by the specific portrayal of the island of Patmos—and the realm of the revelation. In this way, despite the fact that Cimabue's version is placed seemingly after his other Apocalypse scenes, the viewer can understand it as John's receipt of the vision and thus outside of the vision itself. To further underscore this sense of separation, the mural depicting John and the angel occupies a smaller

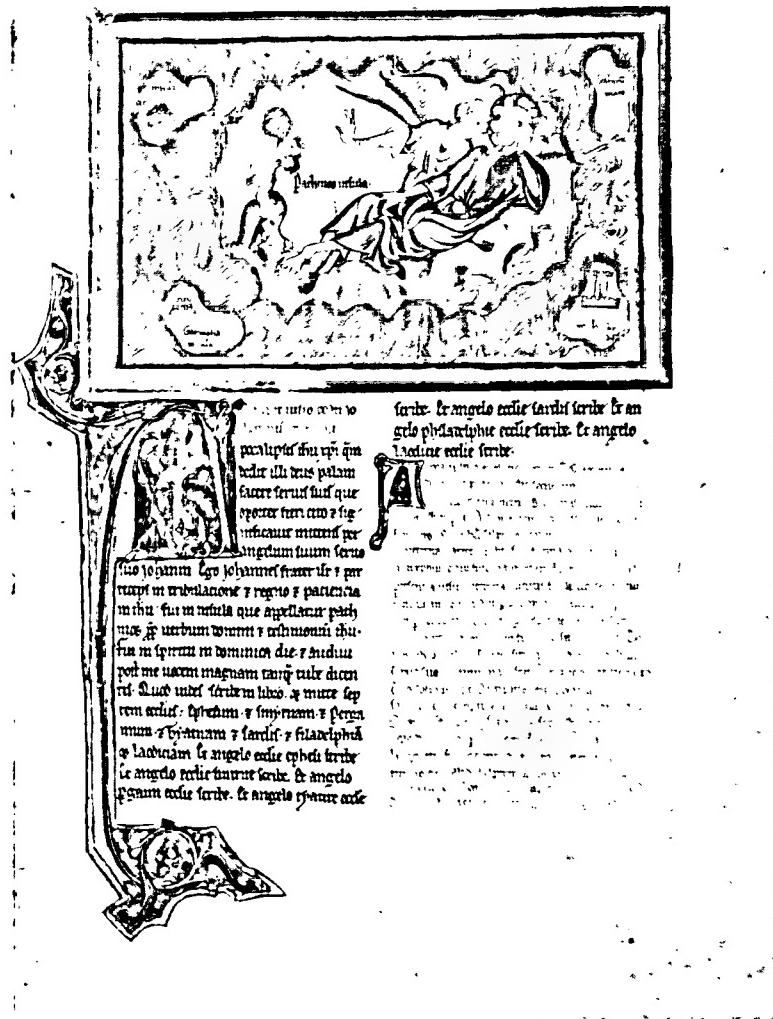


Fig. 2.18: Unknown artists, *John's Vision on Patmos*, Dyson Perrins Apocalypse, Tempera and gold on parchment, 31.9 x 22.5 cm, folio 2, The J. Paul Getty Museum.

⁹⁴ For a discussions of various explanations for the placement of John on Patmos at the end of the cycle, see Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 110.

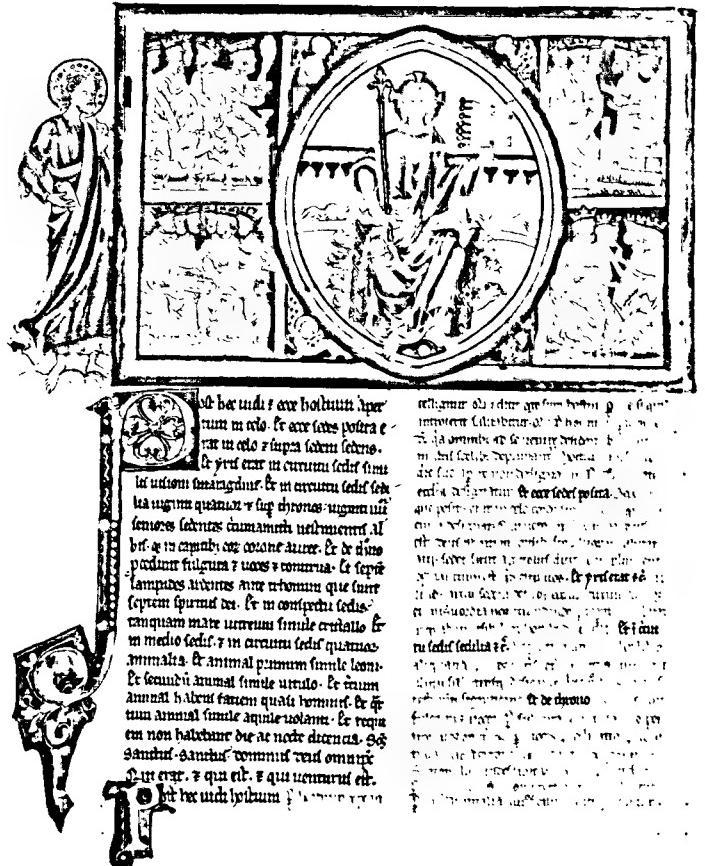


Fig. 2.19: Unknown artists, *Vision of the Throne of God*, Dyson Perrins Apocalypse, Tempera and gold on parchment, 31.9 x 22.5 cm, folio 3 verso, The J. Paul Getty Museum.

portion of the wall than the scene of the Fall of Babylon next to it. This disproportion becomes obvious when one compares this wall with the northwest transept wall, where Cimabue paints two scenes of equal size (Fig. 2.1).

I propose that the connection made between John and the door is deliberate for several reasons. In chapter 4 of the Apocalypse, John recounts how '... I looked, and behold a door was opened in heaven, and the first voice which I heard, as it were, of a trumpet speaking with me, said: Come up hither, and I will shew thee the things which must be done hereafter'.⁹⁵ Illustrated manuscripts of the Apocalypse sometimes interpret these words quite literally, depicting John peering through a door or window as he receives his vision. Examples of this motif can be seen in the Getty Apocalypse mentioned above (Fig. 2.19).⁹⁶ Cimabue may have had similar images in mind when choosing to position the visionary John above the actual door to the sanctuary, which, in the tradition of Christian exegesis, would have stood in for Heaven in the minds of the friars.

It is telling that Cimabue begins the Apocalypse cycle, presented on the south wall of the transept, with the vision that immediately follows the text's description of a door opening in heaven. The first three chapters of Revelation, which detail John's admonitions and instructions to the seven churches, are not illustrated. Instead, the Adoration of the Lamb, described in Chapter 4, is placed to the right of the large crucifixion scene (Fig. 2.20). This image is also immediately visible when one enters the south transept from

the convent door on the west wall, opposite the crucifixion. In other words, what John saw when the door of heaven opened is precisely what the friars saw when opening the door to the basilica from their convent. The portal itself marked the point of transition between their private quarters and their church. The passage from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm, so to speak, is the very boundary that John himself crosses mentally when he experiences his vision. It is also no accident that the image of John as the bearded seer who received the vision on Patmos at the end of his life is mirrored across the space on the opposite wall by the image of the youthful evangelist who becomes the adopted son of Mary in the crucifixion. Like John, the friars would hope to spend a lifetime in contemplation, aiming to grow from sons of Mary to be seers of the truth, ideally reaching the highest levels of mystical contemplation the way he did.

A similar connection can be made between Peter and the door in the north transept. As the disciple to whom Jesus gave the keys to his kingdom, Peter was regarded as a gatekeeper.⁹⁷ A

⁹⁵ DRB, Apocalypse 4:1.

⁹⁷ DRB, Matthew 16:19.

⁹⁶ On this manuscript see Morgan, *Illuminating the End of Time*.



Fig. 2.20: Cimabue, *Adoration of the Lamb*, south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

door is an integral part of the story in at least two other biblical accounts in which Peter is the protagonist. When Peter and another disciple follow Jesus as Jesus is led before the high priest prior to his crucifixion, Peter stands at the door outside the temple of the high priest. It is there that he first denies Christ when asked by the girl who kept the door whether he knew Jesus.⁹⁸ Later, when imprisoned by Herod, the doors of the prison where Peter is incarcerated are miraculously opened by an angel, who then also opens the city gates for the apostle. In the same story, when Peter then knocks on the door of the house of Mary, mother of John, they do not believe that it is in fact Peter. He knocks again, and the servant girl Rhoda insists that it is him.⁹⁹ Like Peter, the friars engaged in the *vita activa* would be likewise literally and metaphorically knocking on doors, seeking converts and performing acts of charity. Peter's parallel position to that of John on Patmos in the north transept thus once again marks both Apostles as emblems of the *vita mixta* for the friars. Cimabue's careful placement of references to these spiritual role models within the spaces leading from the convent to the church enabled the friars to engage with their images physically as they moved in and out of the space. Such a device is yet another enhancement of the somaesthetic experiences included within the transepts.

The Eucharist, the Senses, and Apocalyptic Vision

As we have seen, John would have offered an imitative devotional model for the friars, but how would they have read his Apocalyptic vision itself as Cimabue depicted it? To answer this question we must consider why the theme of the Apocalypse was chosen for the south transept and how the individual scenes were selected. To the right of the crucifixion, the Apocalypse narrative begins with the Adoration of the Lamb, followed by the Angel of the Sixth Seal and the Four Winds, and Christ in Glory with Seven Angels, all on the south wall, while to the right the narratives continue on the west wall with the Fall of the Rebel Angels in the upper lunette, and then on the lower wall, the Fall of Babylon and John on Patmos. As I shall explain further below, the cycle has been interpreted in terms of Franciscan devotion to the angels, particularly the archangel Michael, to whom the altar there was dedicated. Several scholars have noted the Franciscan interest in the Apocalypse and the idea that Francis was the Angel of the Sixth Seal, and Cimabue's murals have also been connected to the readings for the liturgy for the feast day of St Michael.¹⁰⁰ There is considerable merit in all of these interpretations, but what has not been considered is how Cimabue's murals illustrate visionary experiences, and as such they contain unique details designed to invoke and engage the senses. The Apocalypse, the final book of the bible sometimes referred to as 'Revelation', recounts a mystical vision in which John the Evangelist, so medieval Christians believed, described what he saw, heard, touched, smelled, and tasted. It is among the most, if not the most, sense-oriented text in the bible, and Cimabue and his Franciscan patrons chose episodes for illustration that capitalize on the text's sensorial elements. The Apocalyptic cycle can thus be read as designed to synesthetically engage the friars' *vita contemplativa*.

Before understanding the sensorial aspects of the cycle, it is necessary to situate the overall theme of the south transept in the context of Franciscan interest in the Apocalypse in the thirteenth century. Despite its complex verbal imagery, the text of the Apocalypse enjoyed wide popularity in late medieval Europe among both clerical and lay populations. As mentioned in the Introduction, the rise of the mendicant orders spurred this general interest in eschatology, in part because of the controversial prophecies of Joachim of Fiore. Joachim was a Cistercian monk whose twelfth

⁹⁸ DRB, John 18:15–18.

⁹⁹ DRB, Acts 12.

¹⁰⁰ On the liturgical connections see Hueck, *Cimabue und Das Bildprogramm*, p. 289, and for the connections to Saint Michael see for example Belting, *Die Oberkirche*, pp. 61–63.

century commentaries on the book of Revelation declared that a 'third age', predicted to begin in 1260, would render the church obsolete. Some interpreted the rise of the mendicant orders as the sign of this third age. Joachim's prophecies were condemned officially as heretical in 1263, but orthodox commentaries on the Apocalypse flourished, many of which were influenced by Joachite thinking.¹⁰¹ The Franciscans were among several groups interested in the Apocalypse as they asserted their identity and place in church history. In Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, the prologue describes Francis as having an 'angelic ministry', and more specifically, aligns him with the Apocalyptic Angel of the Sixth Seal:

And so not without reason is he considered to be symbolized by the image of the Angel who ascends from the sunrise bearing the seal of the living God, in the true prophecy of that other friend of the Bridegroom, John the Apostle and Evangelist, for 'when the sixth seal was opened', John says in the Apocalypse, 'I saw another Angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God'.¹⁰²

The stigmata were thus interpreted as Christ's impressing of a seal upon the body of Francis, analogous to the seals on the book of the Apocalypse.¹⁰³ Bonaventure goes on to praise Francis as a model for all Christians, one who 'was an imitator of angelic purity and was placed as an example for the perfect followers of Christ'.¹⁰⁴

The idea that Francis was the Angel of the Sixth Seal has been cited by scholars as the primary motive behind the choice of Apocalypse scenes for the south transept. The importance of angels more generally in the Apocalypse narratives is also key, because the altar dedication in the south transept is to St Michael. As I will explain further in Chapter 4, the Franciscans were particularly devoted to the angels, in part because the cradle of Franciscan life in the early days of the order was the Porziuncola, a small church in the foothills of Assisi dedicated to Saint Mary of the Angels.¹⁰⁵ In 1224, on Mount La Verna, Francis retreated to fast in honor of St Michael and Mary, and it is devotion to these particular saints that prompted his receipt of the stigmata there.¹⁰⁶ The friars reaffirmed their devotion to St Michael by raising his feast day to a double at their General Chapter meeting at Assisi in 1269.¹⁰⁷ And just as John's vision has the angels playing a key role in the Apocalypse, so too did Francis receive the stigmata with a vision of the Seraph, an angel, as discussed in Chapter 1. An image of Christ surrounded by cherubim and seraphim, now almost totally destroyed, once graced the lunette above the south transept crucifixion, serving as a reminder of the angelic presence in Francis' biography (Fig. 2.2). Throughout the south transept, in fact, angels dominate the decorative programme. Standing figures of angels line up behind the blind arches on both sides, seemingly acting as sentinels guarding the sacred space (Fig. 2.3). Additional bust-length angels also line the painted lintels above these blind arches. Bust length figures of angels grace the voussoirs of the arches on the east and west walls, recalling similar figures of angels in sculpture on the portals of French cathedrals. And originally, enormous figures of angels occupied the space between the stained glass windows on the south wall. As Hans Belting noted, angels are also protagonists in the Apocalypse episodes Cimabue illustrates in the transept.¹⁰⁸ The angels also frequently aid the viewer in understanding the narratives in terms of sensory experience, as I will explore further below.

The story begins on the south wall with the mural to the immediate right of the crucifixion, depicting the Adoration of the Lamb (Fig. 2.20). Here, Cimabue's composition collapses certain

¹⁰¹ On the mendicants and the Apocalypse see Burr, 'Mendicant Readings', pp. 89–102.

¹⁰² Bonaventure, *LM*, Prologue, 1, in FAED, vol. 2, pp. 526–27.

¹⁰³ Bonaventure, *LM*, Prologue 2, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 527.

¹⁰⁴ Bonaventure, *LM*, Prologue, 2, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 527.

¹⁰⁵ See note 7 above.

¹⁰⁶ Bonaventure, *LM* 13:1, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 631.

¹⁰⁷ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁸ Belting, *Die Oberkirche*, pp. 61–63.

narrative details from chapters 4 and 5 of the Apocalypse text. In chapter 4, John describes seeing a throne in heaven surrounded by twenty-four elders wearing white garments and golden crowns. Around the throne he sees four living creatures, the man, ox, lion, and eagle of Ezekiel's vision (4:3–8), commonly interpreted in medieval art as the symbols of the four Evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Cimabue includes some of the details from chapter 4, such as the twenty-four elders in their white garments and golden crowns, and he indicates the vision of the four living creatures via the roundels with the symbols of the four Evangelists arranged around the throne. Other elements correspond more closely to chapter 5 of John's text:

And I saw: and behold in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the ancients, a Lamb standing as it were slain, having seven horns and seven eyes: which are the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth. And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat on the throne. And when he had opened the book, the four living creatures, and the four and twenty ancients fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints: And they sung a new canticle, saying: Thou art worthy, O Lord, to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; because thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God, in thy blood, out of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.¹⁰⁹

Cimabue does not portray a human figure on the throne, but the hovering book with the seven seals, placed precisely where one would find the right hand of someone seated on the throne, implies his presence. The figures of elders, surrounded by even more angels, raise their hands in gestures of worship and gaze upwards at the lamb on the throne. The viewer witnesses the instant just before the volume is opened, a narrative moment that creates a sense of impending drama and a kinetic energy echoed in the upward movement of the crowd.

Cimabue's choice to depict this point in the story, in which the slain lamb has the power to open the book, also allows for an inter-visual reference to the crucifixion scene to the left. Cimabue positions the throne with the lamb in the Apocalypse scene facing the adjacent crucifixion, allowing viewers to make the connection that the crucified Christ is the lamb on the throne and the pathway to redemption. As Irene Hueck noted, the lamb is stretched out on the throne in a posture of a sacrificial victim, and its head is turned to the left towards the crucifixion scene on the adjacent wall.¹¹⁰ Such an association would be particularly appropriate as the friars celebrated Mass, a reenactment of Christ's sacrifice. Visual references to the multi-sensory experience of this moment are also included in the scene. Two citharas, held by two of the elders, and two large vials, seemingly suspended in air above the wings of the central angel, are strategically positioned at the centre of the composition. These objects invoke the senses: the music of worship as well as the scent of 'odors' and the notion that the prayers of the faithful have a particular smell. That smell would come from the incense burned in worship, its smoke rising towards heaven as the prayers did.¹¹¹ The Mass was a likewise synesthetic experience that was designed to be transformative, turning wine and bread into the body and blood of Christ. Consuming these elements, thus also engaging the sense of taste and touch, sanctified and purified the faithful. Thus Cimabue's mural would have mirrored this sensory world of the liturgical celebrations. The importance of the golden prayer-vials as emblems of the power of prayer was also underscored by pope Gregory IX, who in July of 1228, shortly after the canonization of Francis, issued a bull, *Sicut phialae aureae (On the Golden Vials)*, citing Apocalypse chapter 5.¹¹² In it these prayer-vials are described as instruments of purification as well as a celebration of the memory of saints such as Francis.

¹⁰⁹ DRB, Apocalypse 5: 1–9.

¹¹¹ On incense in worship practices see Herrera, *Holy Smoke*.

¹¹⁰ Hueck, *Cimabue und Das Bildprogramm*, pp. 284–86.

¹¹² See discussion in Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 112. For the bull see *BF*, vol. 1, n. 24, p. 49, 21 February 1229.



Fig. 2.21: Cimabue, *Angel of the Sixth Seal and the Four Winds*, south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Cimabue skips over chapter 6, in which the sixth seal is opened and the four horses, commonly depicted in illustrated manuscripts of the text, are described.¹¹³ Instead, the following mural, to the right of the Adoration of the Lamb, corresponds to the first verses of chapter 7, and depicts the Angel of the Sixth Seal and the Four Winds (Fig. 2.21). Four winged figures stand in front of a crenelated wall that encloses a city set within a rocky landscape. In the damaged upper portion of the mural, an angel flies above the sun-lit sky. As John's text relates:

After these things, I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that they should not blow upon the earth, nor upon the sea, nor on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the sign of the living God; and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying: Hurt not the earth, nor the sea, nor the trees, till we sign the servants of our God in their foreheads.¹¹⁴

Cimabue's interpretation of this text is entirely novel. In medieval Apocalypse illustrations, artists usually depicted the winds as masks blowing air, held by angels.¹¹⁵ In Cimabue's version, instead, four winged figures stand in front of the walled city. Their hair tossed by the wind, these figures hold large, cornucopia-shaped horns. Cimabue has taken particular care to depict the spiral-like striations on the exterior of these horns, which are very different from the tube-shaped horns with long handles shown for example in the following scene (Fig. 2.23). The stripes and curves of the horns seem to mimic the bodies of the figures themselves, with their exposed sternums and wiry musculature. Both instrument and human communicate the power of wind as a potentially destructive force. Perhaps with classical personifications of the winds or the seasons in mind, Cimabue thus fuses the form of a wind with that of an angel.¹¹⁶ They do not blow their horns, because they are obeying the angel of the living god who has instructed them to 'hurt not' the landscape around them. Thus, while the sense of touch is indicated by the windswept hair and drapery of these figures, the sense of hearing is quelled; the winds keep silent. The intact city, sea filled with fish, and rocky landscape behind these figures assure the viewer that the destructive power of the winds is controlled.

The setting for this scene outside a fortified city wall is likewise different than earlier representations, which typically either forgo details of landscape or map the winds onto an image of earth and water. This choice to interpret the earth in terms of a city needs to be understood in the context of Cimabue's entire mural cycle. In the Evangelists vault painted in the crossing, Cimabue uses cityscapes to indicate the four known regions of the world: Judea, Greece, Asia and Italy (Fig. 2.22). The Franciscan Order began and evolved in urban centres, and thus inserting such an image into their vision of the Apocalypse reflects their consciousness of the importance of the cities to their own evangelical mission.¹¹⁷ This mission may also be referred to by the position of the flying angel in this scene, the angel of the Sixth Seal, a figure with whom, as we have seen, the Franciscans associated Francis himself. As Bellosi noted, the angel occupies the central position on the wall, directly opposite the scene of the martyrdom of Peter on the other side of the transept. This inter-visual connection links Francis and Peter, an allusion to Francis as head of the new apostolate.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Belting, pp. 61–63, and more recently Ruf, *Die Fresken*, p. 298, label this scene the 'Opening of the Sixth Seal'. Belting's identification of the angel above the city as the angel of the sixth seal hinged on the idea that the angel had a halo with a nimbus; restorations undertaken after Belting's book was published revealed that in fact the angel has no cross in the halo. See Hueck, 'Cimabue und Das Bildprogramm', p. 298.

¹¹⁴ DRB, *Apocalypse* 7: 1–3.

¹¹⁵ One example is in an Apocalypse manuscript from the thirteenth century now in the Pierpont Morgan Library,

Morgan MS M.524, fol. 3v.

¹¹⁶ On the classical antecedents of these figures see Carlettini, 'Gli angeli', pp. 255–67.

¹¹⁷ Ruf postulated that the crenellated city in the Apocalypse cycle is the Eternal City, the Heavenly Jerusalem, but it may also indicate the city of Babylon, the fall of which is depicted in a subsequent fresco on the wall located to the right of this scene. See Ruf, *Die Fresken*, p. 298.

¹¹⁸ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 196.

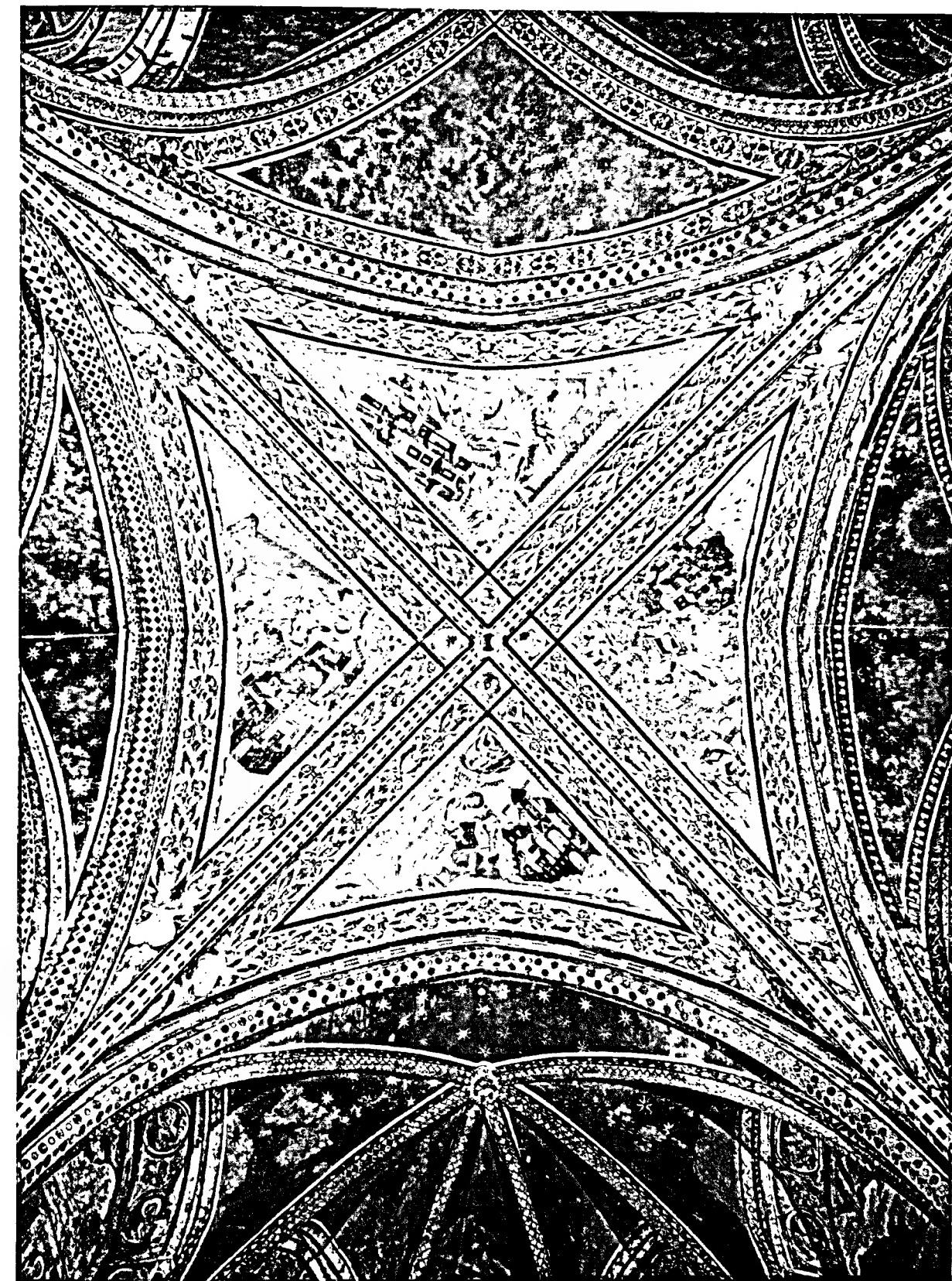


Fig. 2.22: Cimabue, Evangelists' Vault, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.



Fig. 2.23: Cimabue, *Christ Enthroned with the Angel with the Gold Censer*, south transept, Upper Church, Assisi.

The angel-winds, placed between the viewer and the cityscape as though guarding it, communicate the controlled chaos that leads to the next moment in the Apocalypse story, Christ in Glory with the Angel with the Gold Censer (Fig. 2.23). Cimabue depicts Christ in a mandorla, surrounded by seven angels blowing trumpets. The savior hovers above an altar, and an eighth angel swings a censer below it.¹¹⁹ A crowd of figures, divided into two groups, kneels in supplication below. The mural corresponds closely to the text in Apocalypse 8:

And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven, as it were for half an hour. And I saw seven angels standing in the presence of God; and there were given to them seven trumpets. And another angel came, and stood before the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given to him much incense, that he should offer of the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar, which is before the throne of God. And the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended up before God from the hand of the angel.¹²⁰

The text indicates the contrasting sensory experiences of the vision: a half hour of silence was followed by the blasting of trumpets and the wafting of incense. Cimabue chooses to depict the moment in which the silence is broken and the censor releases its fragrance. The crowd of people in the lower portion of the scene, in which men and women are included, are those of Cimabue's own time. In the front of both sides of the crowd, friars kneel, indicating the primary audience for the image. Thus the prayers of the faithful at the altar in the space of the transept, which would also be carried aloft by incense used in celebrations in front of the mural, are directly connected to John's vision.

The Apocalypse narratives continue on the wall to the right. Although because it is placed higher it is more difficult to interpret in the context of the murals on the lower wall, the upper lunette, now unfortunately very damaged, depicts the next scene in the sequence, the Fall of the Rebel Angels. A watercolour by the nineteenth century artist Johann Anton Ramboux enables something of a reconstruction of this image (Fig. 2.24). A heavenly battle is shown. Angels hover in the upper part of the lunette, floating on a striated, curved field. Their lances reach below this field, piercing members of the crowd of cascading winged demons below. The central angel thrusts his lance into the mouth of a dragon. Michael must therefore be the leader of these militant angels, for the image corresponds closely to the text from Apocalypse 12:

And there was a great battle in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought, and his angels. And they prevailed not: neither was their place found any more in heaven. And that great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world. And he was cast unto the earth: and his angels were thrown down with him.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Frugoni claims that the nails and lance were once visible on this altar, connecting the image to Christ's Passion; see *Quale Francesco?*, p. 116.

¹²⁰ DRB, Apocalypse 8:1–4.

¹²¹ DRB, Apocalypse 12: 7–9.



Fig. 2.24: Johann Anton Ramboux, *Fall of the Angels*. In S. Francesco d'Assisi, (nd). Gouache and watercolor over pencil on paper, 43.5 x 55 cm, Museum Kunstpalast, Collection of the Art Academy, Düsseldorf, R24. After Cimabue, *Fall of the Angels*, south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.



Fig. 2.25: Cimabue, *Fall of Babylon*, south transept, Upper Church, Assisi.

By dividing the composition into upper and lower sections, a distinct boundary between heaven and earth is indicated, making it clear that the battle is won by Michael and his cohort. The falling demons, who in Rambaux's watercolour appear to be screaming, enable the viewer to imagine the terrible sound accompanying their dramatic descent to earth.

Cimabue likewise presents the following scene as though the viewer were witnessing the pivotal point in the drama. Below the lunette depicting the Fall of the Angels on the west wall is painted an image of the Fall of Babylon. (Fig. 2.25) An angel at left hovers above another cityscape, but this time a crenellated wall encloses tumbling towers and houses. Snakes slither out of the windows of many of these edifices. At left, a door in the wall opens to reveal people fleeing the city. In the foreground, demons, two monkeys or apes, and an ostrich, are further signs of doom. At right, a group of devils is poised to enter the city through a second open door. Another devil blows a shofar-like trumpet from inside this door. The noise and chaos of a city under siege is clearly communicated. The mural corresponds most closely to the description of the fall of Babylon in Apocalypse 18:

And after these things, I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power: and the earth was enlightened with his glory. And he cried out with a strong voice, saying: Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen: and is become the habitation of devils and the hold of every unclean spirit and the hold of every unclean and hateful bird... And I heard another voice from heaven, saying: Go out from her, my people; that you be not partakers of her sins and that you receive not of her plagues.¹²²

Intriguingly, Cimabue places animals, the monkeys and bird, at the front and centre of his composition. Here he is interpreting the text's reference to 'every unclean bird'. There is a long exegetical tradition associating the ostrich with foolish and cruel actions. In the book of Job, the ostrich is derided for laying its eggs and then not caring for them.¹²³ A sermon by the Franciscan saint Anthony of Padua compares the behavior of an ostrich to heretics. Medieval bestiaries cite the ostrich as an example of hypocrisy, and apes are equated with the devil. In fact, bestiary accounts compare apes to fallen angels, making their inclusion in the narrative of the fall of Babylon most appropriate.¹²⁴ And indeed the apes refer inter-visually to the thwarted fallen angels shown in the mural painted in the lunette above them. Like the tumbling demons, these evil creatures will not win the day, ultimately. As Chiara Frugoni recently pointed out, the entire Apocalypse cycle at Assisi is extraordinarily hopeful in its approach.¹²⁵ The innocent citizens of Babylon, including children, escape, and Michael wins a clear victory. These are the most violent episodes represented; signs of the end of time such as the moon turning to blood or the plagues are not shown. Instead, the clear path to salvation—Christ, and the role of the mendicants and St Francis in leading to that hope—is emphasized.

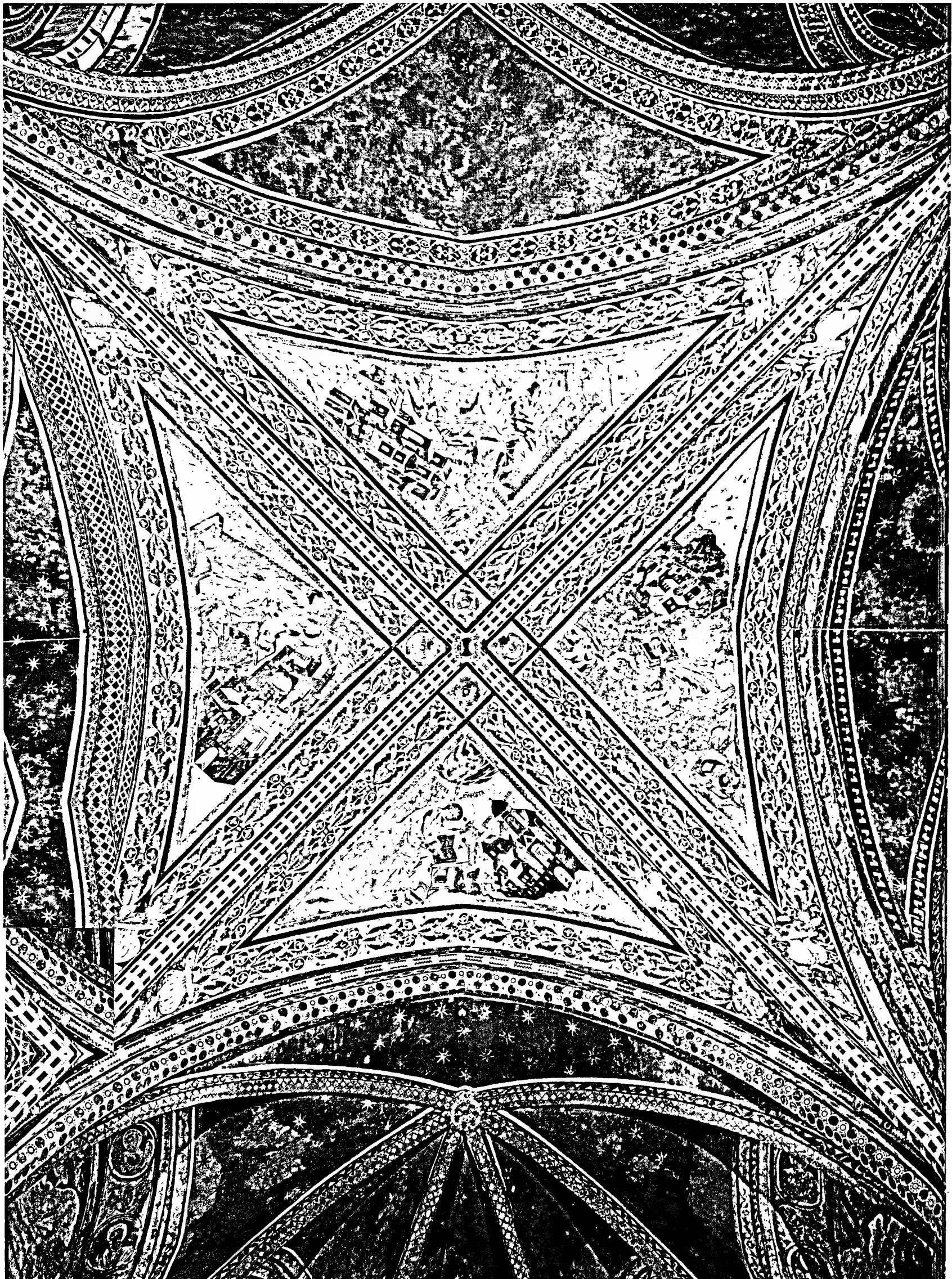
Cimabue's visual rendition of St John's eschatological text is different from any known programme of the same subject, both in terms of his selection of scenes and their compositions. And although there are iconographic links between the Apostles cycle and Roman paintings of the same themes, Cimabue nonetheless shapes the cycle in ways that made it directly relevant to the life of the friars in the Sacro Convento. Both sides of the transept celebrate the friars' *vita mixta* through the prominence of the apostolic models of John the Evangelist, Peter, and Paul. The Apostles cycle offered the friars a means of journeying alongside these figures as they carried out their evangelical mission. Attention to the senses in acts of healing and conversion would encourage the friars to imagine witnessing these episodes of sacred history firsthand. The specific topography of Rome and Jerusalem Cimabue painted enhanced this sense of contemplative presence, and his innovative compositional strategies would encourage the viewer to envision him or herself physically inhabiting the same spaces. The transept murals would thus have aided the friars in their quest for sensory-laden contemplation, the first step on the spiritual ladder leading to a profound knowledge of God beyond the body, as Francis had experienced. But the transepts were also linked to the apse and high altar of the church, and thus in the next chapter, I will explain how the Marian imagery in the apse further enhanced the friars' devotional lives.

122 DRB, Apocalypse 18:1–4.

123 DRB, Job 39:13–18.

124 Roman D'Elia, *Raphael's Ostrich*, pp. 28–31.

125 Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 126.



CHAPTER 3

The Virgin Made Church: The Marian Apse and Evangelists' Vault at Assisi

By the thirteenth century, Marian devotion was at the heart of Christian worship throughout Europe. Francis of Assisi, however, expressed a particular love for Mary that shaped his own religious formation as well as his creation of the Franciscan Order. Early in his ministry, Francis and his friars took up residence at Santa Maria degli Angeli, a church dedicated to Mary in the valley below Assisi. It was there that Francis prayed that Mary might become the friars' particular champion: 'In the church of the Virgin Mother of God, her servant Francis lingered, and with continuing cries insistently begged her who had conceived and brought to birth the Word full of grace and truth to become his Advocate'.¹ Bonaventure further asserted that Francis' dedication to Mary was essential to the saint's Christocentric spirituality. In the chapter of the *Legenda maior* where Francis' stigmatization is described, Bonaventure declared that Francis 'embraced the mother of the Lord Jesus with an inexpressible love since she made the Lord of Majesty a brother to us, and through her, we have obtained mercy'.² Francis composed his own praises to the Virgin; in his litany, 'A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary', he lauded her virtues: 'Hail O Lady, Holy Queen, Mary, holy Mother of God, Who are the Virgin Made Church, chosen by the most Holy Father in heaven'.³ Although the concept of Mary as *mater ecclesia* was a longstanding one in Christian exegesis, Francis uniquely describes her as the 'Virgin Made Church'.⁴ Mary's purity therefore predicates her election by God as the genitor of the Christian faith.

In celebration of the Franciscans' early and lasting attachment to her, Mary takes centre stage in the Upper Church at Assisi; the high altar is dedicated to her, and the apse features scenes from Mary's life, death, and Assumption (Fig. 3.1). These Marian images are discussed in some of the foundational literature on Assisi cited in the previous chapters, as well as in a short article published by James Stubblebine in 1967.⁵ More recently, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin offered detailed analyses of the innovative nuptial imagery in the cycle, and Jay M. Hammond proposed a new reading of the iconography of the upper walls of the apse.⁶ Chiara Frugoni has also connected the Marian scenes to Franciscan exegesis and to other Marian scenes in the Upper Church.⁷ The relationship between the Order's celebration of Mary and Cimabue's uniquely complicated images of her in the Upper Church, however, remains underexplored.

1 Bonaventure, *LM*, 3:1, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 542.

2 Bonaventure, *LM*, 9:3, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 598.

3 The phrasing '... quae es virgo Ecclesia facta' is apparently original to Francis. See Francis of Assisi, *A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, in FAED, vol. 1, p. 163, note a.

4 For discussions of the symbolism of Mary as church in relation to the Franciscans, see Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', pp. 95–112.

5 See Stubblebine, 'Cimabue's Frescoes of the Virgin',

pp. 330–33, who also cites the brief discussions of the apse imagery in earlier studies of the Upper Church.

6 See Lavin and Aronberg Lavin, *Liturgia*, pp. 19–86 and Lavin and Aronberg Lavin, *The Liturgy of Love*, pp. 4–47, the material of which is republished in Aronberg Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', pp. 95–112, and Lavin, 'The Meaning of Marriage', pp. 153–70. See also Hammond, 'Identifying and Re-Interpreting', pp. 491–515.

7 Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 135–46.

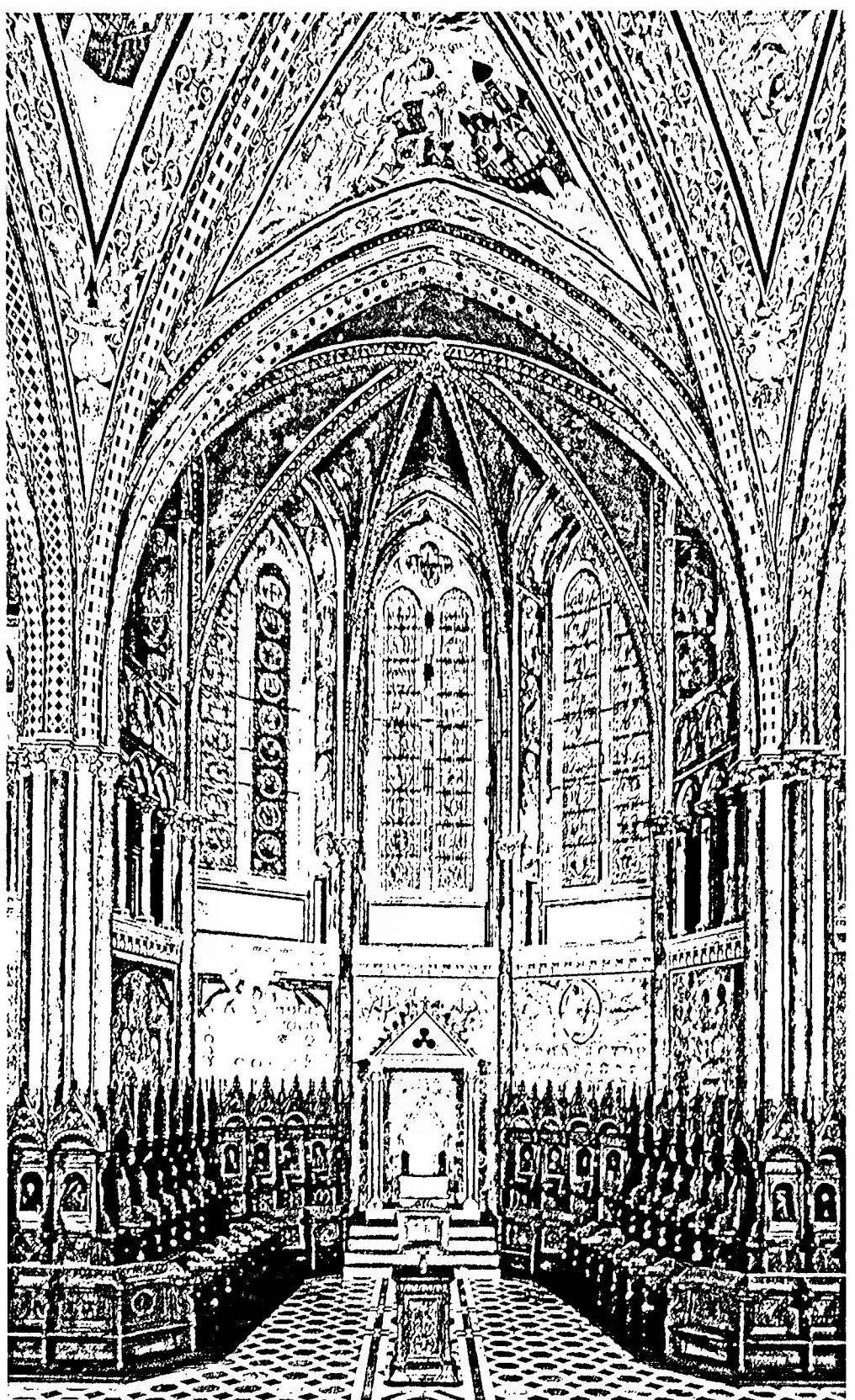


Fig. 3.1: View of Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

In this chapter, I will analyze Cimabue's portrayals of Mary at Assisi, arguing that his revolutionary imagery celebrated Mary's role in the Incarnation as well as her position as special advocate of the Order and its identity as the new Apostolate. The Marian cycle in the Upper Church glorified the Virgin as the pure vessel through which Christ's sacred body was born. The selection of scenes in the apse also underscored the friars' spiritual kinship to Mary and the idea that members of the Order were, like the Apostles, adopted sons of Mary. Further, I propose that the Evangelists' vault, with its unprecedented, individually identifiable cityscapes, needs to be understood in the context of the Marian imagery in the apse.⁸ The Evangelists' vault would have reminded viewers of Mary's role as mother of Christ, the Incarnate Word written about by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The connection between Mary and the Evangelists' vault reinforces the idea that Mary embodied the church itself in its missionary efforts. The Marian images in the Upper Church thus make clear the central role Mary played in the corporate identity of the Franciscans as well as the part she was to have in shaping the friars' *vita apostolica*.

The Setting of the Apse Murals

The apse of the Upper Church frames the high altar, the liturgical heart of the church. Although the altar is currently placed in the first bay of the nave, it was originally positioned closer to the apse, directly beneath the crossing.⁹ As noted in Chapter 2, a screen or other type of barrier once separated the apse and transepts from the rest of the church, and upon this, a trio of panel paintings was placed.¹⁰ The removal of the Renaissance choir stalls during the restoration of the church following the 1997 earthquake revealed bare walls below Cimabue's murals in the apse, as opposed to the fictive textiles he painted on the lower walls of the rest of the transept. Cimabue's apse decoration must therefore have anticipated the installation of choir stalls there.¹¹ There is no physical evidence of any other kind of enclosure or liturgical furnishings within the apse and transepts. As suggested in Chapter 2, the friars perhaps sat on benches in the transepts as well as in choir stalls within the apse. Its walls are also positioned widely so that the space feels much more open than the narrow apses in typical Gothic churches. If there were no additional barriers within the space, the large murals, particularly the four scenes on the lower walls, would have been very visible to devotees gathered in the transepts, and could perhaps have been glimpsed beyond the barrier by those in the nave.¹² The murals thus created a dramatic backdrop for the high altar, the site of the celebration of Marian feasts.¹³

In place prior to Cimabue's arrival, the altar was dedicated to the birth of Mary.¹⁴ The exact reasons behind this original dedication in 1253 are unclear. There has been some speculation that the dedication to Mary's Nativity speaks to the Franciscan position on Mary's Immaculate Conception, an idea that was hotly debated throughout the Middle Ages, and in fact only officially confirmed by the Catholic Church in 1950.¹⁵ Many Franciscans who wrote in the late thirteenth century, John Duns Scotus the most prominent among them, argued strongly in favor of the concept

⁸ Lavin briefly mentions the vault imagery at the end of her study of the nuptial imagery in the apse, but does not analyze its close connections to the Marian cycle. Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', pp. 111–12.

⁹ Iacovelli, 'L'altare', pp. 132–39; Hueck, 'La Basilica', p. 50–54.

¹⁰ Hueck, 'La Basilica', p. 50–52; see also more recent discussion in Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 72–74.

¹¹ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 62.

¹² Miller and Taylor-Mitchell suggest a similar kind of visibility beyond the screen for Giotto's Ognissanti Madonna within the Florentine church of the Humiliati. See Miller and Taylor-Mitchell, *From Giotto to Botticelli*, p. 31.

¹³ On the readings for the Marian feasts see Van Dijk, 'Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary', pp. 450–56.

¹⁴ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 67.

¹⁵ For discussion of the debates about this doctrine in the thirteenth century, see Derbes and Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart*, pp. 126–27.

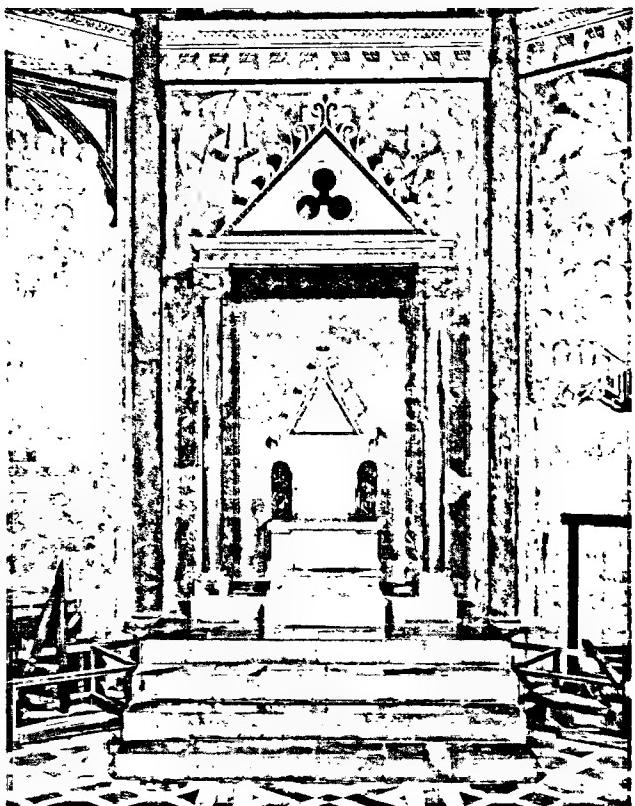


Fig. 3.2: View of Apse with Papal Throne, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

that Mary had indeed been conceived without sin.¹⁶ Earlier in the thirteenth century, however, the doctrine was still much questioned; Bonaventure, for example, argued against the notion of the Immaculate Conception.¹⁷ While the notion of the Immaculate Conception is not specifically emphasized in Cimabue's apse murals, the themes chosen are aligned with the altar dedication to Mary's Nativity. Via unique or highly unusual iconographic schemes, the murals highlight Mary's conception and birth, while also celebrating her life more broadly via scenes of her marriage, as well as her death and Assumption.

One thing all Christians agreed upon at the time was Mary's inherently holy nature, and the mural decoration in the upper portion of the apse thus focuses on the purity demonstrated in Mary's early life: her conception, birth, infancy, and marriage. In this way, Cimabue departs from the typical Marian narratives such as the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity of Christ, and Presentation of Christ in the Temple that had already become standard in art of the period. Cimabue and his Franciscan patrons perhaps sought alternate themes in part because these Marian stories and their typological Old Testament counterparts are included in the stained glass windows of the apse, already in place by Cimabue's time.¹⁸ Cimabue's murals are much more visible than the images in the glass, however. They therefore

broadcast a new emphasis on Mary herself and her physical and spiritual purity, not just her motherhood of Christ. Cimabue's inventive imagery proclaimed a new Marian theology, one that declared the Franciscan Order's special allegiance to her.

Although the selection of scenes in the Assisi apse reflects a novel spin on Mary's biography, the Upper Church's celebration of Mary has antecedents in Roman apse imagery, for example at Santa Maria in Trastevere and Santa Maria Maggiore.¹⁹ Rome had a longstanding devotion to the Virgin, fueled by several famous icons of Mary, including one at the Franciscan church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli.²⁰ As discussed in the previous chapters, the basilica at Assisi was a papal chapel, and its dedication to Mary served as one of many links between it and the Roman churches. Situated among the large murals depicting Mary's death and assumption, the papal throne at Assisi also deliberately alludes to the connection between Assisi and Rome (Fig. 3.2). The dating of the throne is debated, but it was almost certainly in place prior to Cimabue's decoration of the walls around it, for he painted two roundels with papal portraits, probably saints Sylvester and Gregory the Great, on either side of it.²¹ Majestically detailed, with two lions carved on its arms and a relief depicting the lion, asp, basilisk and dragon from Psalm 90:13 on its step, the throne has been compared to the one later commissioned by the Franciscan Pope Nicholas IV at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome.²² There was an intentional ideological affinity between the two

¹⁶ Levi d'Ancona, *The Iconography*, pp. 10–13.

¹⁷ See discussion of the debates in Sella, 'Northern Italian', pp. 602–03.

¹⁸ The themes of the apse windows are discussed in Martin and Ruf, *Die Glasmalerien*, pp. 19–40.

¹⁹ Although Marian themes were already present in the apse of each church, it should of course be noted that the Marian apse mosaic currently visible at Santa Maria Maggiore post

dates Cimabue's work at Assisi, as do the Marian narratives in the lower portion of the apse at Santa Maria in Trastevere. See Lavin, 'Avant-Garde', pp. 1–46.

²⁰ See Bolgia, 'The Felici Icon Tabernacle', p. 28.

²¹ There is some debate about the identity of the two popes depicted in the apse; see Bonsanti, et al., *La Basilica*, pp. 574–75; Nessi, *La Basilica*, p. 157; Hueck, 'La Basilica', pp. 43–46.

²² Gandolfo, 'Assisi e il Laterano', pp. 88–95.



Fig. 3.3: Cimabue, *Annunciation to Joachim*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

basilicas as papal chapels; the Basilica at Assisi was founded as the 'head and mother' church of the Franciscan Order, in emulation of the Lateran denomination as 'head and mother of all churches'.²³ The centrality of Mary at Assisi, however, went beyond the Roman traditions venerating her. At Assisi, the Franciscans underscored their particular devotion to her as their personal advocate, as Francis had ordained. We can only imagine, then, that when Cimabue met with the friars who may have planned the iconographic programme at Assisi, he was asked to produce images that would celebrate Mary's unique relationship with their Basilica and their Order. In turn, Cimabue produced an utterly original series of images to accomplish precisely that aim.

Purity and Lineage: Mary's Birth and Marriage

The cycle begins with the story of Mary's birth. Her parents are not mentioned in the biblical narratives, but a number of apocryphal texts describe them as a pious couple, Joachim and Anna. According to the thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus of Voragine, they could not conceive a child. Joachim, having attempted to make sacrifices at the altar in Jerusalem, was shamed by a priest for his childlessness, and retreated to the countryside among his shepherds to fast and pray. An angel then appeared to him announcing that he and Anna would bear a daughter who would later bear the Son of God.²⁴ At Assisi, Cimabue inaugurates the narrative of Mary's life with this story of the Annunciation to Joachim, depicted in the upper lunette at left in the apse (Fig. 3.3).

²³ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 59; Hertlein, *Die Basilika*, pp. 109–12; Gandolfo, 'Assisi e il Laterano', p. 97.

²⁴ Jacobus de Voragine trans. Ryan, p. 538.

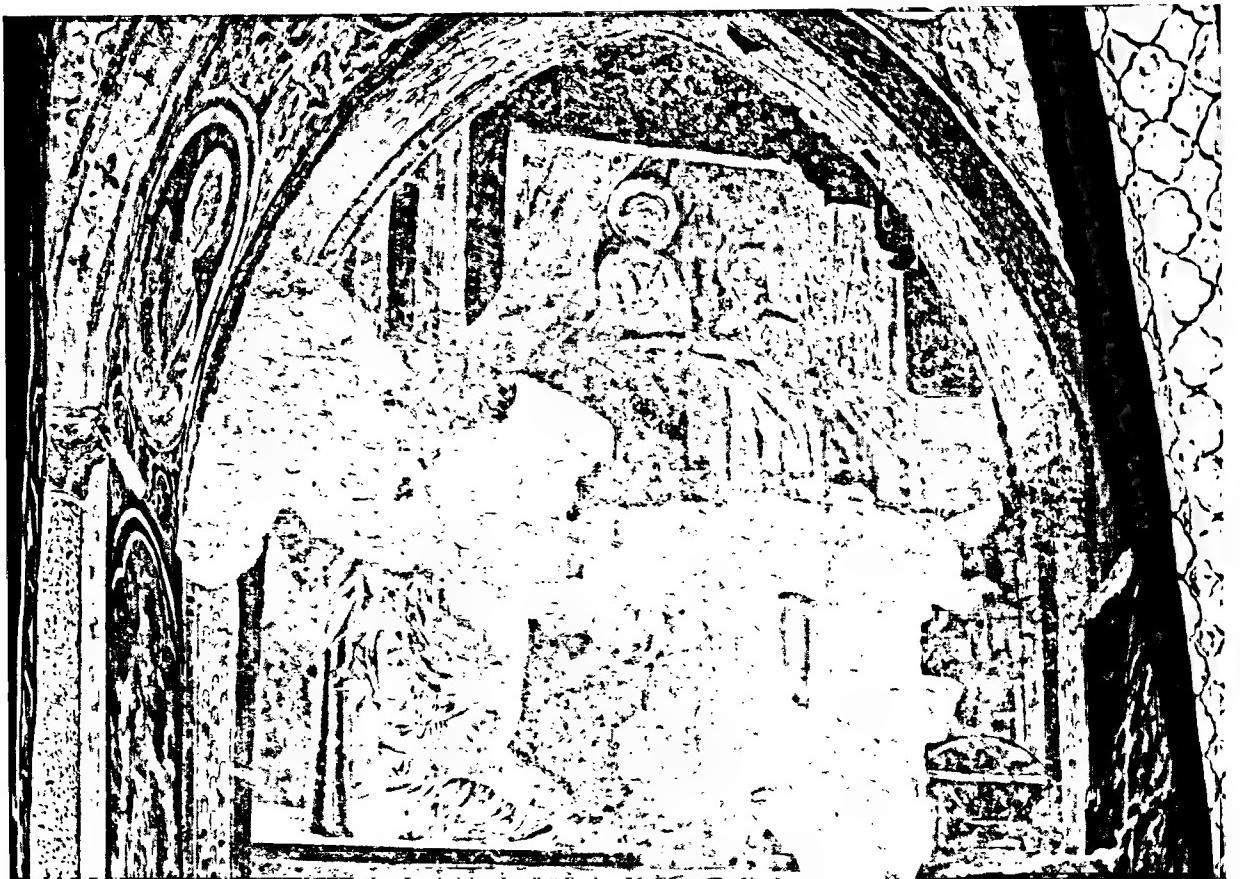


Fig. 3.4: Cimabue, *Nativity of Mary*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

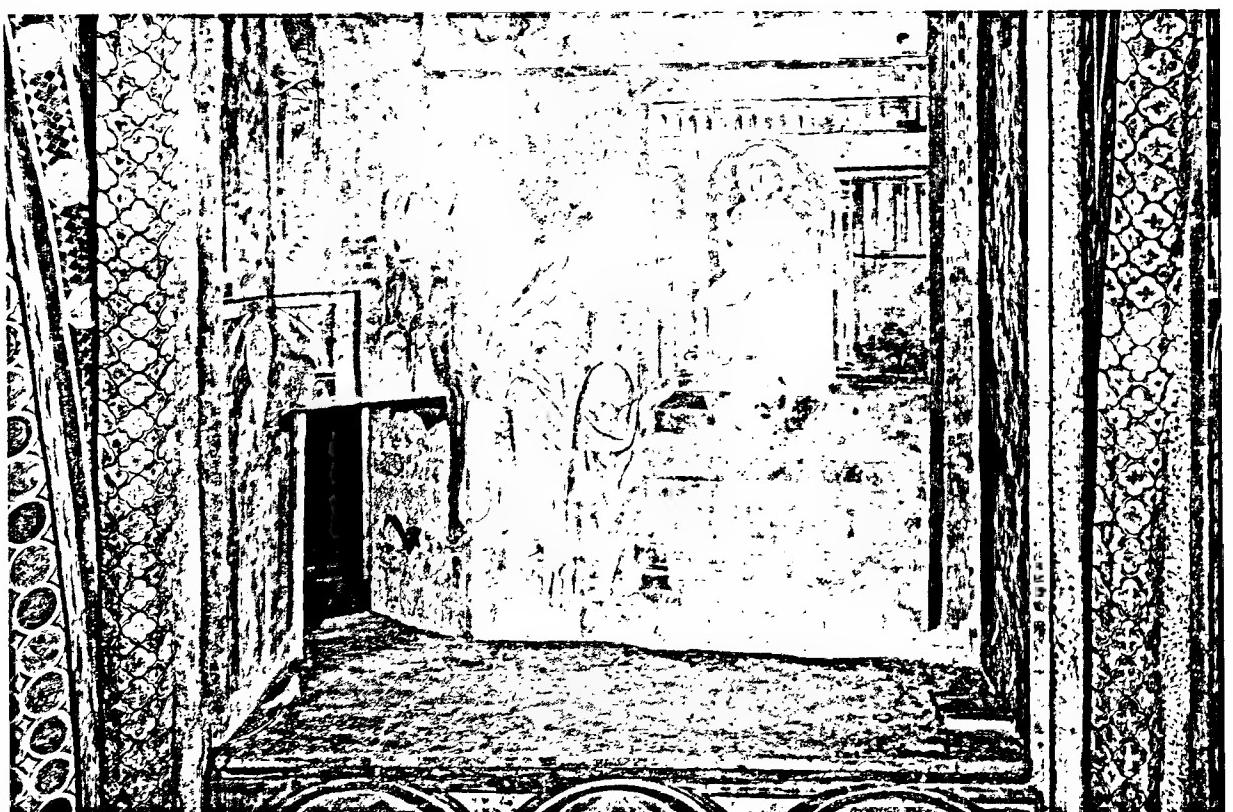


Fig. 3.5: Cimabue, *Suitors Before the High Priest*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

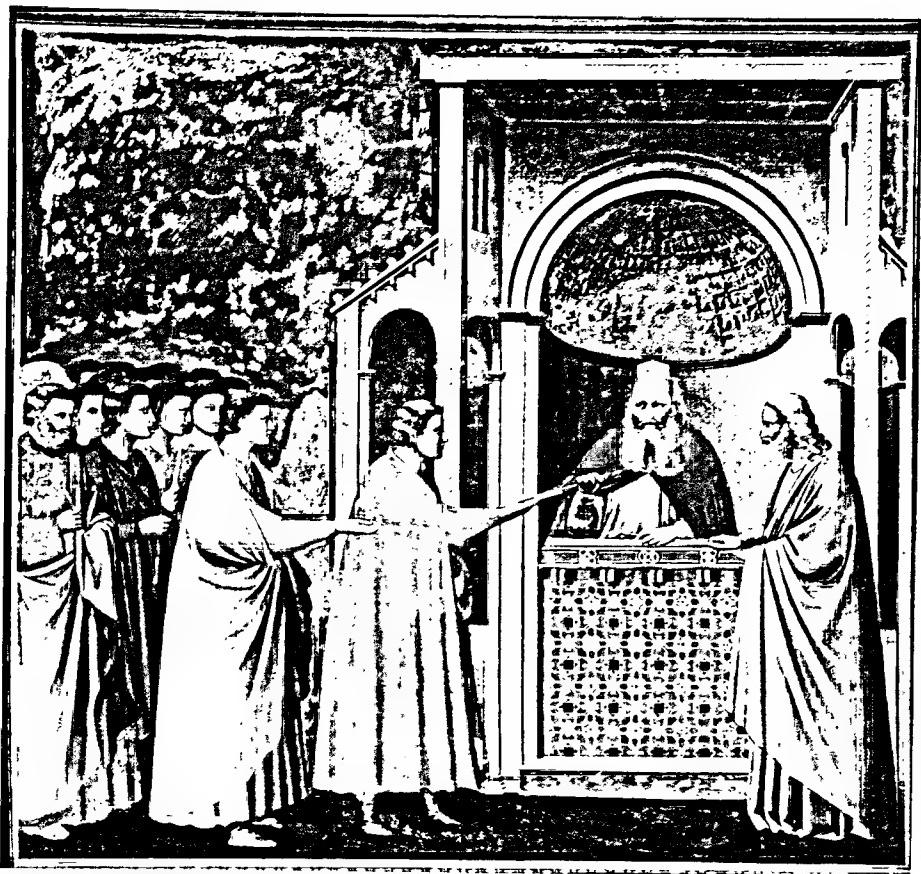


Fig. 3.6: Giotto, *Bringing of the Rods to the Temple*, Arena Chapel, Padua.

Joachim, seated at left in a rocky landscape with a flock of sheep to the far right, looks up to receive the message from the angel. Opposite this scene, across the apse on the upper right lunette, the scene of Mary's Nativity is placed (Fig. 3.4; see also Appendix 2). This mural is in extremely poor condition, but one can see that at the top, Anna is shown reclining in bed recovering from the birth. In a highly unusual twist on the traditional, all-female imagery of this birth scene, Joachim stands next to her, while in the foreground, what little remains of the composition shows a group of midwives caring for the newborn Mary.

The narrative then moves back to the left wall, where in the lower register, the scene is in poor condition, making its subject difficult to identify (Fig. 3.5). Cimabue depicts the Temple at right, with a flight of stairs leading up to it, where a male figure sits, blessing two haloed male figures who approach the steps leading a procession of angels behind them. Some scholars believe this scene to be a heavily repainted, misunderstood version of the story of Mary's Presentation in the Temple.²⁵ According to the apocryphal accounts, Mary went to stay in the Temple as a young girl, living a disciplined life of prayer and being fed miraculously by angels. In most representations of the subject, the child Mary is shown ascending the temple steps as her parents Joachim and Anna look on. Although it is possible that a small figure of Mary once graced the steps shown in the very damaged portion of the mural to the right, Mary's mother Anna also seems to be absent. The three figures in the scene are bearded, haloed, and wear male dress, and it is unlikely that later repainting attempts would have completely altered these details. Jay M. Hammond recently proposed that this scene represents instead the Rejection of Joachim's Sacrifice at the Temple.²⁶ If that is the case, it is odd that the narrative preceding the Annunciation to Joachim would be placed beneath that scene, since the narrative on the opposite wall is arranged from top to bottom.

²⁵ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 80; Ruf, *Die Fresken*, p. 48; Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', p. 97.

²⁶ Hammond, 'Identifying and Reinterpreting', pp. 491–515.

²⁷ Stubblebine, 'Cimabue's Frescoes of the Virgin', p. 330.

²⁸ Jacobus de Voragine, trans. Ryan, pp. 538–39.

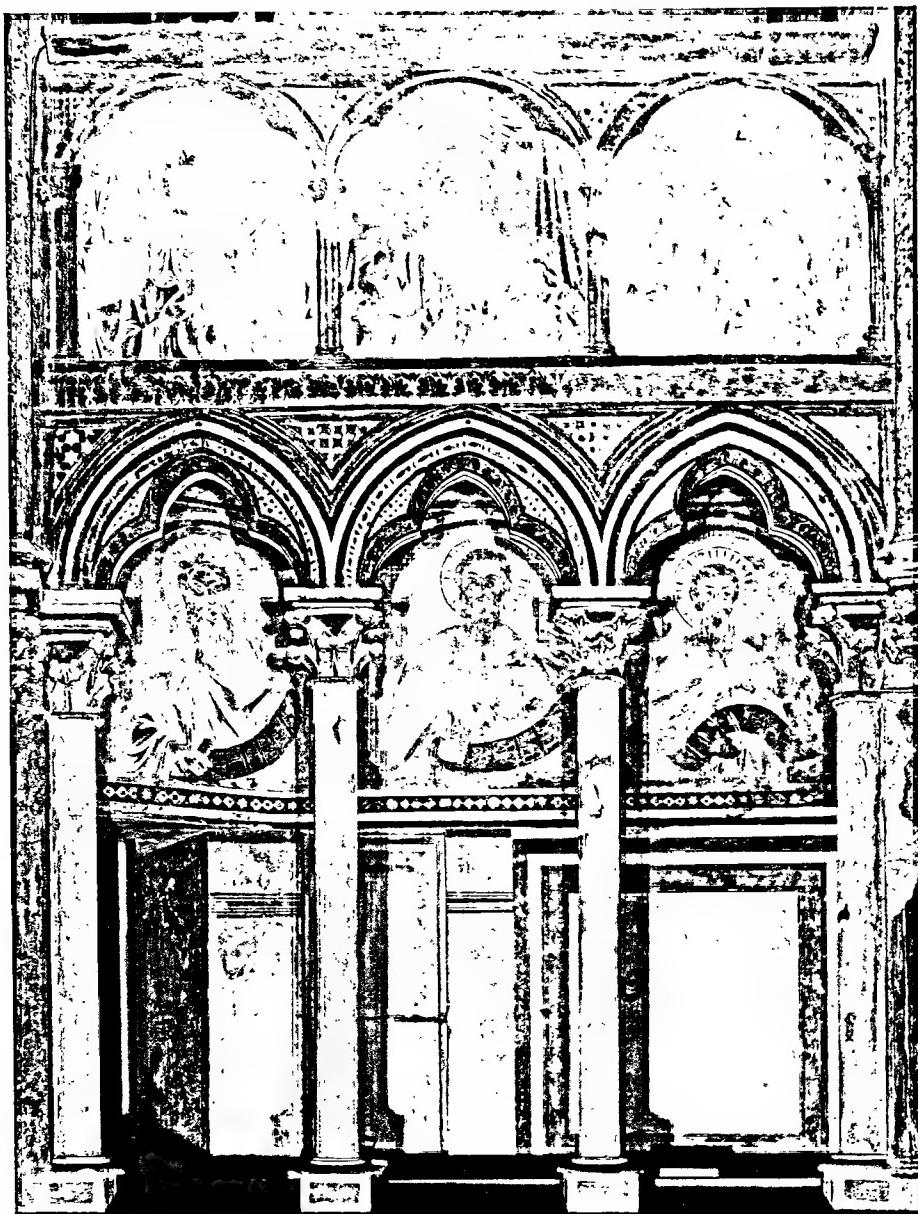


Fig. 3.7: Cimabue, *The Virgin in the Temple, Angels, Prophets*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Following James Stubblebine, who identified but did not discuss the scene in depth, I suggest that the mural represents a seemingly unique scene of Mary's Suitors Before the High Priest.²⁷ The seated figure at the top of the steps within a portico of the church-like Temple must be the high priest Zacharias. Zacharias, also cited as the father of John the Baptist as described in the book of Luke, was cited in apocryphal accounts as the priest who oversaw the Virgin's stay in the Temple and arranged for a contest among her potential suitors. According to the *Legenda aurea*, the priests in the Temple called for prospective bridegrooms of the Virgin to bring branches to put upon the altar to be burned. Giotto represented the suitors bringing the rods and their burning in the Arena Chapel of c. 1306 (Fig. 3.6). According to the legend, Joseph's rod alone flowered and a dove alighted upon it, signaling his anointed status as Mary's future husband.²⁸ In Cimabue's mural, Joseph may thus be one of the bearded male saints who approaches the steps from the left, a compositional structure that is similar to that in Giotto's later depiction of the story. The other haloed figure could be Mary's father Joachim, accompanying his future son in law. On the painted lintel below the scene of the men at the Temple, a bust-length image of Mary framed by a painted

²⁹ John of Caulibus, *Mediations*, p. 11.



Fig. 3.8: Cimabue, *Marriage of the Virgin*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

curtain is flanked by bust-length angels on either side (Fig. 3.7). This image indicates her time spent enclosed at the Temple, where, according to the *Legenda aurea* as well as the slightly later Franciscan *Meditationes vitae Christi*, she was looked after and even fed by angels.²⁹

The next scene in the sequence is on the opposite side of the apse just below the scene of Mary's birth. Here Cimabue presents the scene of the wedding of Mary and Joseph in a novel way (Fig. 3.8). Instead of the more typical image of Mary and Joseph exchanging vows before a priest, they are shown walking under a canopy carried by servants, as though they are returning home after the ceremony. Below this scene, there is a similar painted lintel to the opposite mural, where Mary is again framed by a fictive curtain at the centre of a painted arcade (Fig. 3.9). In this instance, she is reading a book held in her hands. Her parents Joachim and Anna are in a painted arch at the left, gazing admiringly at their daughter. Joseph is at the viewer's right, portrayed in the act of carpentry, his profession. With his axe raised above his head, he seems to be crafting a beam-like object, part of which can be seen behind him (Fig. 3.10).

The unusual imagery of the upper portions of the apse can be connected to Marian theology as emphasized by the Franciscans.³⁰ The inclusion of the scenes commemorating Mary's miraculous conception and birth, the Annunciation to Joachim and the Birth of Mary, mirrors the high altar dedication to Mary's birth.³¹ If it is indeed the Suitors Before the High Priest Zacharias at the Temple in the scene below the Annunciation to Joachim, this rare emphasis on him can be connected to

³⁰ The highly unusual cycle has no parallels in the art of western Europe, although some Byzantine examples reflect a similar emphasis on Mary's life before the birth of Christ. An example that postdates Cimabue's murals is the mosaic cycle of the inner narthex of the Chora Monastery (Kariye Djami) in Constantinople of c. 1315. On medieval iconography of the infancy of the Virgin Marian see Lafontaine-Dosogne.

³¹ The high altar dedication to the Nativity of the Virgin was confirmed by evidence discovered in 1898; for discussion see Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 67, and note 9, p. 469.

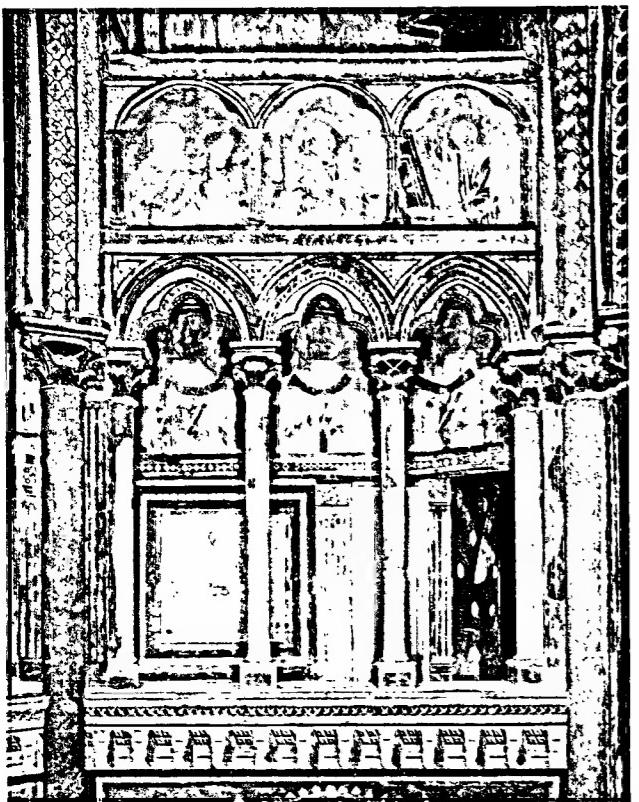


Fig. 3.9: Cimabue, *Anna and Joachim, Mary Reading, and Joseph at Carpentry*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.



Fig. 3.10: Cimabue, *Joseph at Carpentry*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Franciscan exegesis on incarnational theology. Apocryphal accounts tell us that Zacharias was the high priest of the Temple where the Virgin spent her early years, as well as the father of John the Baptist, as is recounted in the book of Luke. It is thus Zacharias who is the progenitor of John, the prophetic precursor to Christ. Bonaventure, in his extensive commentary on the gospel of Luke, declares the importance of Zacharias to the story of the Incarnation. Both Mary and Zacharias receive annunciations of their fertility from the angel Gabriel, and both respond with incredulity. Bonaventure argues that the first chapter of Luke is a lesson on the conception of the savior in Mary's womb. He points to the parallel miraculous conception of the John the Baptist to priestly and virtuous parents, noting the 'double fruitfulness' revealed in the paired stories of the conceptions of Jesus and John.³² This connection is made visually in other images of the period. Cimabue may have helped to design the Florentine Baptistry mosaics, where the scene of the Annunciation to Zacharias appears directly above the Annunciation to Mary (Fig. 3.11). The prominence of Zacharias in the scene of the Arrival of the Suitors of Mary at the Temple in the apse at Assisi thus underscores the miracle of Mary's conception of Christ.³³ I will return to this point in a moment, for the Evangelists' vault offers further evidence of the friars' conscious invocation of Zacharias in their emphasis on Mary.

If we continue to read the upper left lunette of the apse as the scene of the Suitors Before the High Priest (Fig. 3.5), the narrative highlights Joseph's virtues as the man who won the privilege of being Mary's spouse. Franciscan exegetes, including Bonaventure and the author of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, praise Joseph as a just and honest man, the chosen protector of Mary's virginity.³⁴ At Assisi, Joseph is similarly singled out in the scene of the marriage of Mary in the lunette on the opposite wall (Fig. 3.8). Here the espoused couple faces the viewer, a pose emphasizing the dove-topped, flowering rod held by Joseph. Additional visual evidence for Joseph's importance is the bust-length portrayal of Joseph working on the same wall on the lintel just below (Fig. 3.10). Joseph's skill at carpentry, particularly his shaping of wood, was interpreted by medieval exegetes as foreshadowing the wood shaped to be Christ's cross. In Cimabue's mural,

³² Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, vol. 1, ed. Karris, pp. 27–32.

³³ Sella, 'Northern Italian', p. 601.



Fig. 3.11: Attributed to Cimabue and other artists, *Annunciation to Mary* (at upper left) and *Annunciation to Zacharias* (lower left), Scenes from the Life of St. John the Baptist, Baptistry, Florence.

Joseph has crafted a vertical beam-like object and is at work on a horizontal element, objects that allude visually to the cross. The Franciscans' Christocentric spirituality is commemorated in this unusual image, which also serves as a reminder of the domestic life of the Holy Family. Meditational tracts such as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* describe how both Mary and Joseph lived in poverty, both working—Joseph at carpentry and Mary at sewing and spinning—to earn a living during Christ's infancy.³⁵ At Assisi, however, Mary is not depicted working, but instead contemplating the Law of God, as the author of the *Meditationes* claims she did.³⁶ The contrast between the manual work done by Joseph and the contemplative practice of Mary mirrors the traditional Christian division of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Mary and Joseph therefore represent both aspects of holy living, together embodying the *vita mixta* for the friars, a theme central to Cimabue's murals in the transepts, as explored in Chapter 2.

The Assumption of Mary and the Apostolic Life

On the lower walls of the apse, Cimabue painted four large murals depicting the death and Assumption of Mary. The scenes selected emphasize the role played by the Apostles in Mary's last hours, underscoring Mary's adoptive motherhood of them. Cimabue's portrayal of the special relationship between Mary and the Apostles also marks her as an advocate of the Franciscans, who considered themselves the new Apostles. The cycle's spotlight on the Apostles begins with the first episode illustrated at left: The Apostles Saying Farewell to Mary (Fig. 3.12). According to the apocryphal accounts of Mary's death, the Apostles were miraculously transported from their missionary journeys in far-flung corners of the world to join her beside her deathbed. The *Legenda aurea* recounts how an angel came to Mary, announcing to her that her death was imminent. The Virgin then said to the angel:

Even more urgently I ask that my sons and brothers the apostles be brought together here with me, so that before I die, I may see them with my bodily eyes, and may be buried by them and render my spirit to God in their presence.³⁷

The angel grants Mary's request, and the Apostles, her 'sons and bretheren', appear at her bedside. Cimabue illustrates the still living Mary reclining, surrounded by the twelve Apostles gathered in a circle around her.

Also included is an additional male figure standing at right. This figure has been identified as either Dionysius the Areopagite or as the apostle Paul, both of whom, according to the *Legenda aurea*, were also transported to the deathbed of the Virgin.³⁸ The identification of the figure as Paul seems to be more likely within the context of Cimabue's other murals. The north transept features the scene of his martyrdom, and the inclusion of Paul here would further commemorate the Basilica's status as a papal chapel. As Chiara Frugoni noted, Bonaventure also proclaimed Paul, as the last Apostle, as an emblem of the future Order founded by Francis.³⁹ In the apse at Assisi, the Apostles are shown in various poses, some seemingly contemplative, resting their heads in one hand, while others at the front of the composition raise hands in gestures of speech. One apostle seated in the middle of the scene is shown in the act of naming various points by counting them on his hands,

³⁵ John of Caulibus, *Mediations*, pp. 44–48.

³⁶ John of Caulibus, *Mediations*, p. 11.

³⁷ Jacobus de Voragine trans. Ryan, p. 454.

³⁸ Following Meiss, Nicholson, and Stubblebine, Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', p. 98, identifies this figure instead as Dionysius the Areopagite, also mentioned in *Legenda aurea* as present at the death of the Virgin. Chiara Frugoni instead

believes the figure is Paul, citing a later passage in the *Legenda aurea*, where Paul is described seeing the Virgin in the flesh as a consolation for not having seen Christ in the flesh. See Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 137. For the text see Jacobus de Voragine trans. Ryan, 'The Assumption of Our Lady', vol. 4, pp. 110–26.

³⁹ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 99–101.



Fig. 3.12: Cimabue, *Apostles Saying Farewell to Mary*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

a common rhetorical sign. Such details match the *Legenda aurea*'s description of how each of the apostles gave a sermon about Mary and her son at this last visit.⁴⁰ For the friars gathered in the apse at Assisi, the Apostles here, devoted to the Virgin and alternately engaged in contemplation or preaching, exemplified the ideal *vita mixta*.

Cimabue further highlights the apostolic vocation in this mural by presenting Christ's disciples seated around Mary's bed in a circle, recalling their final gathering at the Last Supper. The composition evokes a round or hexagonal table, a motif favored in Franciscan images of the Last Supper because it deliberately recalls early Christian imagery of the Apostles gathered at the table.⁴¹ An example of the portrayal of a circular table at the Last Supper is a small panel painted in the late thirteenth century by an unknown Italian painter, now in the New Orleans Museum of

⁴⁰ Jacobus de Voragine trans. Caxton, 'The Assumption of Our Lady', vol. 4, pp. 110–26.

⁴¹ See Kennedy, *Sanctity Pictured*, pp. 123–24.



Fig. 3.13: Venetian school, *Last Supper*, Tempera and gold on panel, 28.26 x 29.05 x 5.08 cm (framed), New Orleans Museum of Art.



Fig. 3.14: Pietro Lorenzetti, *Last Supper*, Lower Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Art (Fig. 3.13). Later, c. 1320, Pietro Lorenzetti painted a hexagonal *Last Supper mensa* in the Lower Church, where the apostles are similarly disposed around the table (Fig. 3.14). As the friars viewed Cimabue's image of Mary's deathbed, they could make visual connections between Mary's body, the literal container of Christ's body in the flesh, shown here on a table-like bed recalling an altar, and the celebration of his bodily presence in the Eucharist in the space before them at Assisi. The three lamps hanging above Mary, a detail described in the apocryphal accounts, further aligns the setting to that of a church, where lamps were lit not only to provide illumination but also in commemoration of saints at altars or shrines.⁴² A further hint of an ecclesiastical setting is in the framing of the scene with a lobed Gothic arch decorated with fictive cosmati work. Apocryphal legends declare that Mary's death took place at her house, and yet Cimabue here conflates that setting with the house of God, an appropriate connection via the traditional symbolism of Mary herself as the church, an idea that recurs throughout the mural cycle.

The presence of the Apostles within this setting also alludes to the friars' own rituals, such as the singing of the Divine Office, the saying of masses for the dead, and the performance of funerary rites. The friars played an increasingly important role in the burial of the dead; unlike traditional clerics, they allowed laypeople to be buried in their churches, and the Order collected significant offerings from the practice. The *Legenda aurea* relates that the Apostles sang as they conducted Mary's funeral, and that they comforted her at her hour of death and carried her body to its burial site at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The Apostles therefore made Mary's passage from life to death a reassuring one, just as the friars would have done for those they buried. In the Death of Mary scene to the right, the Apostles appear to be carrying the bier of the Virgin as recounted in the *Legenda aurea*, subsequently witnessing the conveyance of her soul to heaven (Fig. 3.15). At the top of the composition, Christ is shown at the centre holding the tiny soul of Mary as in the Orthodox Christian tradition of Dormition imagery. Cimabue here borrows from Byzantine iconography even though the official Franciscan position on Mary's death was that she actually died, rather than just fell asleep, as was widely held in the Orthodox church.⁴³

⁴² The text of the *Legenda Aurea* mentions these lights specifically: 'And when the blessed Virgin Mary saw all the apostles assembled, she blessed our Lord, and sat in the midst of them where the lamps, tapers, and lights burned', see Jacobus de Voragine trans. Caxton, 'The Assumption of Our Lady', vol. 4, pp. 110–26.

⁴³ Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', p. 99.



Fig. 3.15: Cimabue, *Death of Mary*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Unlike standard Dormition images, which typically feature only the Apostles as witnesses, Cimabue's mural presents a crush of saints gathered around Christ as he takes the soul of the Virgin in his arms. This depiction aligns with the *Legenda aurea*'s account of how a huge crowd observed the scene, filling the air with music:

And about the third hour of the night Jesu Christ came with sweet melody and song, with the orders of the angels, the companies of patriarchs, the assembly of martyrs, the convents of confessors, the carols of virgins. And tofore the bed of our blessed Lady the companies of all these saints were set in order and made sweet song and melody.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Jacobus de Voragine trans. Caxton, 'The Assumption of Our Lady', vol. 4, pp. 110–26.



Fig. 3.16: Cimabue, *Assumption of the Virgin*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Although Cimabue's damaged mural makes it difficult to tell whether he has shown the figures actually singing, the *Legenda aurea*'s description of Christ and the saints raising voices in song would serve as a further connection between the sung liturgical celebrations at the altar in front of the mural and the mural itself. Placed in the foreground of the image, the Apostles would again remind the viewer of the role the friars, as new Apostles, played in funerary rites.

As Marilyn Aronberg Lavin has pointed out, there is a strong connection between the imagery of Cimabue's Marian murals and liturgical texts.⁴⁵ The *Legenda aurea* describes how Christ and Mary sang portions of the Divine Office at the moment in which Mary's soul left her body to join Christ:

⁴⁵ Lavin, 'The Meaning of Marriage', pp. 160–63, and for further discussion of the liturgy and the image of the Virgin with the slung leg, see Lavin, 'The Stella Altarpiece', p. 17.



Fig. 3.17: Cimabue, *Virgin and Christ Enthroned*, Apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

For first, Jesu Christ began to say: Come my chosen and I shall set thee in my seat, for I have coveted the beauty of thee. And our Lady answered: Sir, my heart is ready, and all they that were come with Jesu Christ entuned sweetly saying: This is she that never touched the bed of marriage in delight, and she shall have fruit in refection of holy souls. Then she sang of herself, saying: All the generations shall say that I am blessed, for he that is mighty hath done great things to me, and the name of him is holy.⁴⁶

The musical marital dialogue here finds more explicit expression in the following mural depicting Mary's bodily Assumption (Fig. 3.16). Here, Christ and Mary, seated together within a mandorla borne aloft by four angels, are presented as a couple. Christ places one arm around Mary and takes

⁴⁶ Jacobus de Voragine trans. Caxton, 'The Assumption of Our Lady', vol. 4, pp. 110–26.

her hand in his as Mary leans on his shoulder. As Lavin explained, Mary's leg is actually slung over Christ's leg; for medieval viewers this connoted intercourse. The overtly sexual nature of this image can be tied to the nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs, the biblical love poem interpreted by Christian exegetes as a metaphor for Christ's mystical marriage to the Church. The theme of Mary as church and bride of Christ is emphatically portrayed in Cimabue's evocative composition.⁴⁷

The intertwined limbs of the couple also communicate the fact that Mary's union with Christ is a physical one in the Assumption. Cimabue therefore makes it clear that her body, not just her soul, was assumed into Heaven. The notion of Mary's bodily Assumption was debated in the thirteenth century, with the Franciscans arguing strongly in favor of her actual physical rise from the grave.⁴⁸ As though to drive home the point about the verity of the Assumption, the impressive crowd of angels, patriarchs, martyrs, confessors, and virgins from the previous scene now stands in neat rows behind the sarcophagus of Mary, piously witnessing the event. In the foreground, Mary's coffin stands empty now save for the *sudarium*, the cloth her body was once wrapped in. By placing the sarcophagus at the front of the picture plane, Cimabue creates a visual opportunity for the viewer to join the reverent attendees and also become a witness to and believer in this event. The Apostles, too, stand just behind Mary's coffin, their prominence again a reminder of the apostolic role of the friars.

In the final mural from the Marian series, Mary and Christ sit together in majesty (Fig. 3.17). Seated beside Mary on the large throne, Christ extends a blessing arm towards the group of Franciscan friars at his right. With her left hand raised and open palm facing the friars, Mary extends her right arm towards them, presenting them to her son. Her gesture clearly indicates her role as intercessor with Christ on the friars' behalf. A damaged figure, most likely Saint Francis, whose face and halo are today almost totally missing, stands just to the right of Mary and his pose mirrors hers.⁴⁹ His right arm is extended towards the kneeling friars gathered just below him, while his other hand, difficult to make out in the ruined mural, is raised towards the viewer. Francis, like Mary, thus becomes yet another intercessor on behalf of the friars.⁵⁰ Like the image of the Apocalyptic Christ in the south transept discussed in Chapter 2, this image celebrates the Franciscan Order's special privilege at the heavenly court. Both are rare instances for this period of a direct, participatory role for the Order shown in works of art; soon after Cimabue's time, members of religious orders and lay patrons came to be represented increasingly as direct recipients of and interactors with holy figures. An example of this mode of presenting supplicants with the Virgin is Duccio's celebrated small panel of the Madonna of the Franciscans (Fig. 3.18), likely painted c. 1285. Here, three kneeling friars take refuge underneath the mantle of the Virgin, and like the friars depicted by Cimabue at Assisi they indicate the especially intimate relationship she had with the Order.⁵¹ Standing before such images, the friars might see themselves immersed in the world of Mary and Christ among their fellow brethren shown on the walls.

Other visual devices further enable the viewer to bridge the gap between the world of Mary and Christ in Heaven and the embodiment of Heaven represented by the Basilica. By allowing certain figures in the crowd to touch the throne upon which Mary and Christ sit, Cimabue visually describes how these worlds intersect. The most prominent friar among the crowd gathered at left is positioned so that his praying hands are just in front of the throne. This figure draws attention to

⁴⁷ See notes 6 and 43 above.

⁴⁸ Lavin, 'The Meaning of Marriage', p. 166.

⁴⁹ Lavin disagrees with this reading, put forth by Frugoni, instead believing the friar without a halo who is kneeling in front of the throne is Francis. See Lavin, 'Avant Garde', p. 25; Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 144. Although my reading here aligns with Frugoni's, I want to thank Dr Lavin for discussing this image with me.

⁵⁰ Frugoni reads two types of friars, Seraphic Order members and lay brothers, in the crowd, and sees this image as an ideological one indicating the union of the fractious order. I find the distinctions she discerns difficult to ascertain visually. See *Quale Francesco?*, p. 144.

⁵¹ Schmidt, 'La Madonna', pp. 30–44.



Fig. 3.18: Duccio, *Madonna of the Franciscans*, Tempera and gold on wood, 23.5 x 16 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

the presence of the friars and also bridges the gap between the foreground, the space of the viewer, and Mary and Christ in the receding space created by the diagonals of the throne. On either side of the throne, an angel similarly leans forward to touch the cushion Christ and Mary sit upon, and a female martyr places her hand on the base of the throne at right. It is significant that the Apostles do not appear in this image, although they were prominently featured in the first three murals of Cimabue's Assumption narrative. It is as though St Francis and his friars have in fact replaced the Apostles; in modeling their spirituality after them, the friars gain similar firsthand access to the Mother of God herself.

Although the altar is dedicated to Mary's birth, the most prominent images in the apse in fact illustrate her death and Assumption. This seeming paradox can be explained in two ways. First, Christians have long equated death with the notion of a re-birth in the eternal life with God. Mary's death, ideally presented as we have seen, leads to her new birth as Christ's heavenly spouse and queen. Secondly, for the Franciscans, the metaphor of birth was invoked in descriptions of Francis' building of the Order. In the *Legenda maior*, Bonaventure describes the seven earliest followers of Francis as his sons:

For the poor and sterile simplicity of our holy father had already brought seven to birth and now he wished to bring to birth in Christ the Lord all the faithful of the world called to cries of penance.⁵²

Bonaventure states that 'all the world' is to be brought to birth in Christ. The apse murals are accordingly replete with references to miraculous fertility, that of Mary as well as of Zacharias and the Virgin's parents Anna and Joachim. The cycle depicting Mary's Death and Assumption concludes with the portrayal of Mary blessing the Franciscans, her adopted sons whom Francis has given birth to spiritually. Cimabue's unique portrayals of her life and death mark Mary as much more than the mother of Christ; her pure life and pious death also give rise to the Franciscan Order.

Conceiving and Spreading the Word: The Evangelists' Vault and Incarnational Theology

The Marian images in the apse face the high altar, which was originally placed directly under the crossing vault, as mentioned above (Fig. 3.19). In this vault, the pictorial emphasis on the Apostles continues in Cimabue's paintings of the Four Evangelists, originally set against a gleaming gold-leaf background that created an elegant backdrop for the saintly authors.⁵³ As will be discussed further below, Cimabue's depiction of the Evangelists with cityscapes at Assisi has generated much interest from scholars, even with the partial destruction of the vault in 1997, when the Matthew web collapsed irreparably.⁵⁴ But the Evangelists vault is nearly always treated in isolation in the literature, and only the Mark web has been extensively analyzed. To fully understand Cimabue's novel presentation of the long established theme of the Four Evangelists, we must consider the vault's context in terms of the Marian imagery in the Basilica.

Cimabue appropriated the iconographic theme of the Four Evangelists seated at their desks from earlier medieval and Byzantine traditions. Departing from these precedents, however, he paired the seated Evangelists with cityscapes, an unprecedented addition that connects their Gospels to specific places, the cities where the individual texts were first written. What is distinctive about

⁵² Bonaventure, *LM*, 3:7, in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 546.

⁵³ The web of the vault depicting Matthew was destroyed in the earthquake of 1997. My comments are based on photographs taken before the disaster.

⁵⁴ On the quake see Bohlen in the New York Times; <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/27/world/a-fatal-quake-shatters-fresco-in-assisi-shrine.html>, accessed January 15, 2016.

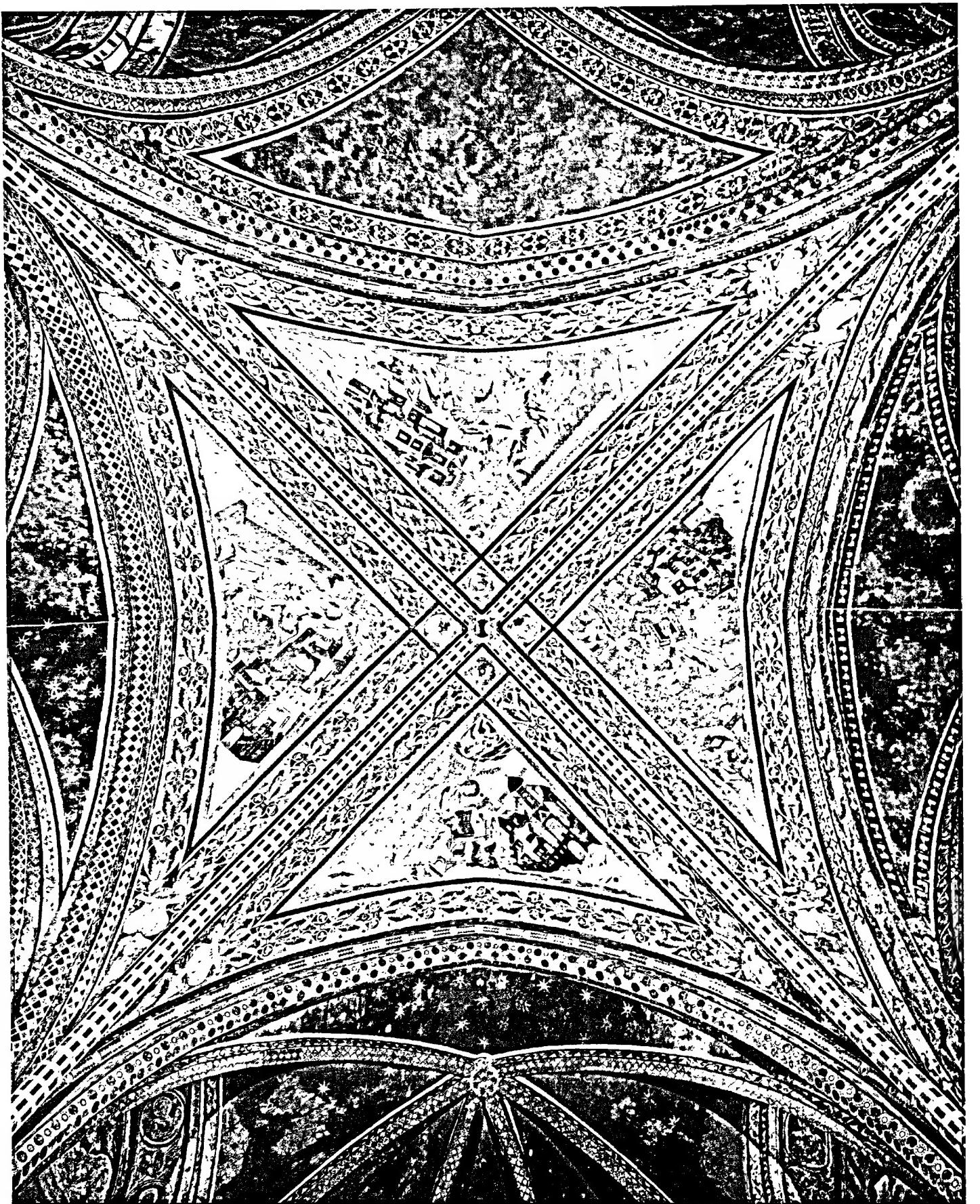


Fig. 3.19: Cimabue, *Four Evangelists*, crossing vault, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

this presentation of the Apostles is the emphasis both on the act of writing the Gospels, as well as the presence of cityscapes alongside them. This depiction is very different from the presentation of the Four Evangelists in the roughly contemporary Sancta Sanctorum, also commissioned under Nicholas III. Although the theme of the Evangelists is placed in the crossing vault, as at Assisi, in the Sancta Sanctorum the Evangelists are represented by their creature symbols derived from the book of Ezekiel: Matthew is represented by an angel, Luke an ox, John an eagle, and Mark a lion.⁵⁵

Instead, in emphasizing both the Evangelists' acts and places of writing, Cimabue at Assisi underscores the global importance of the Word of God, and its divine analogue in Christ the eternal *Logos* or 'Word made flesh', that is the Incarnate Word cited in the first line of John's gospel.⁵⁶ In different parts of the ancient world, the gospel writers proclaimed through their texts that God had come to earth in the flesh. As his human mother, Mary was instrumental in Christ's Incarnation, that is the coming of the *Logos*, which was the transformation of God into human form. A similar act of transformation took place at the altar below the vault, where the bread and wine blessed by a priest became the body and blood of Christ; God likewise was made manifest in physical (and digestible) form. It is for this reason that early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) went so far as to describe the consumption of the Eucharist as the 'eating of the *Logos*'.⁵⁷

The Franciscan connection between the Eucharist and the Incarnation can be seen in some of the earliest writings of Francis himself. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 had of course settled any remaining debates about whether or not Christ's body and blood were actually present in the Host, and the Franciscans were early champions of Eucharistic devotion. Before his Rule was established, Francis attempted to set guidelines for the way of life followed by his early brothers. Of first importance in his 'First Admonition', composed around 1219, is the idea that the Eucharist represents a daily Incarnation of the Lord; that is, the bread and wine were mystically, habitually transformed into Christ's body and blood:

Behold each day He humbles Himself as when from His 'royal throne' into the Virgin's womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; daily He comes down from the bosom of His Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest. As He revealed Himself to the holy apostles in true flesh, so He reveals Himself to us in the sacred Bread; and as they saw only his flesh by an insight of their flesh, yet believed that He was God as they contemplated Him with their spiritual eyes, let us, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, see and firmly believe that they are his most holy Body and Blood living and true. And in the way the Lord is always with His faithful, as He Himself says: Behold I am with you until the end of the age.⁵⁸

It is through Mary's womb, Francis states, that the Incarnation happens, and thus the daily Incarnation of the Eucharist becomes mediated through her. Francis further points out the importance of the Apostles as witnesses to Christ as God in the flesh, and it is here that we can find a link to the Evangelists vault. The Evangelists Matthew and John were first witnesses to the life of Christ, Luke is thought to have known the Virgin Mary (and according to legend, painted her portrait), and Mark is traditionally believed to have recorded Peter's eyewitness accounts of Christ's life.⁵⁹ The Evangelists thus testify to the miracle of God's Incarnation as Christ on earth.

To fully understand the connections between the Marian imagery and the vault, it is first essential to look closely at Cimabue's rendering of the Evangelists (Fig. 3.19). Cimabue's murals in

55 For an analysis of the Sancta Sanctorum frescoes see Hauknes, pp. 1–46.

56 DRB, John 1:14.

57 On the connection of the logos and the Eucharist in Clement's writings see Rordorf, pp. 116–21.

58 Francis of Assisi, 'First Admonition', in FAED, vol. 1, p. 129.

59 Hornik and Parsons, *Illuminating Luke*, pp. 13–14.

the crossing vault follow the long pictorial tradition of representing the Evangelists accompanied by their symbols derived from Ezekiel's vision of the Four Living Creatures. Each web of the vault features an Evangelist seated at a desk, while at his feet his creature emblem, shown in miniature, looks up at him. Mark has a dignified lion, Matthew a diminutive angel, Luke a proud ox, and John a stately eagle. The divine inspiration given to each author is signaled by angels who emerge from the clouds at the apex of each of the vault's triangles to touch the head of the figure at work.⁶⁰ The Evangelists are seated on wooden thrones, each shown in a slightly different pose indicating various stages of composition and writing. Mark sits with an open book before him on his desk. Leaning on one elbow as if taking a break to think, he holds a quill pen in one hand and a scraper in another. A scroll and another book can be seen inside his desk. Luke is busy at work writing at his desk, which also contains an additional book. John, with his book open on the lectern before him, is engaged in the act of reading rather than writing. The eagle at his feet seems poised to form the base of his lectern, akin to actual lecterns from the medieval period that featured the form of a sculpted eagle.⁶¹ To the left of John stands a second lectern with two closed books, as well as a cruet and a paten. Matthew has instead put down his quills, resting his writing instruments on his desk while reading, perhaps checking his work. Matthew's book is turned away from the viewer, and Mark's text is illegible, but the texts visible in the open books that Luke and John are composing both relate to the coming of Christ. Cimabue shows Luke writing verse 1:5 from his Gospel, 'There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias'.⁶² The evangelist's pen is poised in the act of writing the 's' at the end of 'Zacharias', further underscoring the reference to the father of John the Baptist, Zacharias, who, as discussed above, would prepare the way for Christ. This emphasis on Zacharias relates the vault to the Marian imagery in the apse, alluding to the theme of the Incarnation. John also writes of the Incarnation; the text seen on the book in front of him is taken from the first lines of his Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God'.⁶³ Both the texts of Luke and John are appropriate to the placement of the vault directly above the high altar, where liturgical celebrations commemorated Christ's Incarnation.⁶⁴

The individual Evangelists face cityscapes positioned in the opposite corner of each triangular web. Similar in scale to the images of the seated Evangelists, these cities are easily visible from below. Inscriptions identify the lands that these urban images indicate. Matthew is paired with 'Judea' represented by Jerusalem, Mark with 'Yitalia' represented by Rome, John with 'Asia' represented by Ephesus, and Luke with 'Acchaia' or Greece represented by Corinth.⁶⁵ As Chiara Frugoni pointed out, the arrangement of the Evangelists within the web of the vault allows for symbolic connections to be made between it and the other spaces within the Basilica.⁶⁶ It also takes into account potential viewing points for the cityscapes. Luke faces the apse with its Marian scenes, appropriate because it was Luke who chronicled the birth of John the Baptist as well as the Annunciation to Mary, thus describing the exact moment of Christ's Incarnation. The placement of Matthew's portrait opposite Luke's web also relates to the high altar dedication to the birth of Mary, for it was the genealogy of Mary and Christ chronicled in Matthew that was read on the feast day dedicated to Mary's Nativity. Less obvious is the choice to place Mark and his accompanying 'Yitalia' or Rome facing the south transept Apocalypse scenes and John and Asia or Ephesus in

⁶⁰ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 81, notes that this motif is Byzantine and mostly unknown in the west.

⁶¹ An example is a fragment of a lectern from Pistoia, dated to c. 1300, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/465937>.

⁶² DRB, Luke 1:5. The text of the Vulgate reads: 'fuit in diebus Herodis regis Iudeae sacerdos quidam nomine Zaccharias de vice Abia et uxor illi de filiabus Aaron et nomen eius Elisabeth'; Cimabue's inscription is derived from it: FVIT I[N] DI / EB[US] HERO / DIS REG[IS] / IV ... SAC[ER]DOS QU[ID]A[M] NO[M]I[N]E ZACHA[R]IAS DE. I would like to thank one of the anonymous peer reviewers for pointing out the position of Luke's pen in this image.

⁶³ DRB, John 1:1. The inscription reads: 'IN PRIN [CIPIO] ERAT VERBM ET DEUS ERAT VERB[UM]'.
⁶⁴ Brooke, *The Image of Francis*, p. 344.

⁶⁵ The inscription reads in the Luke web reads: I(N) P(RO) N(CIA) ACCHAIA. On the identification of the city as Corinth, see Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 82, who offers no further explanation of Cimabue's choice.

⁶⁶ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 82.

the opposite web. The depiction of Rome would pair most obviously with the north transept Apostles scenes and John with the Apocalypse scenes. Yet the opposition of themes in the vault versus the walls of the respective transepts must have been intentional; Cimabue and the friars who planned the scheme were perhaps thinking of the point of view of those entering and exiting the transept from the private areas of the convent. As Donal Cooper and Janet Robson noted, the Roman cityscape seen in the Mark web is remarkably legible to a viewer entering from the papal apartments adjacent to the north transept.⁶⁷ Stepping into this area of the church, one would be greeted by this image of Rome above, while also immediately surrounded by the Apostolic scenes on the walls. Conversely, those entering from the south transept door could see the city of Ephesus, corresponding to John's apostolic life and the related Apocalypse scenes.

Much art-historical ink has been spilled over the detailed view of 'Yitalia' or Rome seen in the Mark web (Fig. 3.20). There is no denying that the image of 'Yitalia' as Rome crystallizes the ideological connections between the Basilica at Assisi and Rome, appropriate since Francis' burial church was also a papal basilica. In this most detailed of his cityscapes, Cimabue has taken great care to show recognizable Roman monuments. At left, the Torre dei Milizie with its crenellations and columns stands next to the dome of the Pantheon, its oculus and pediment clearly visible. Additional buildings refer specifically to the papacy. The Castel St Angelo is clearly shown in the right foreground, with the pyramid of the Meta Romuli behind it. The Meta Romuli, believed to be the tomb of one of the twin founders of Rome, Romulus, was also significant in terms of the tradition stating that Peter was crucified in a spot between two pyramids, the Meta Romuli and the Terebinth of Nero. The presence of the Meta Romuli here echoes the depiction of the same monument in the mural depicting the Martyrdom of Peter in the north transept, as seen in Chapter 2. At the back of the city to the right is the basilica of St Peter's, with its tower and the Deesis mosaic decorating its façade. Peter was also believed to have dictated his experiences of the life of Christ to Mark, who wrote them down, so the pairing of Mark with Rome implicates Peter as well.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the most significant papal reference in the 'Yitalia' mural is Cimabue's depiction of the Palace of the Senate at the top left of the cityscape. The palace was the seat of the Senators (known in other cities as consuls), the secular rulers of Rome. Its façade is emblazoned with the Roman senatorial shields with SPQR (Senatus populusque Romanus) alternating with the red and white emblems of the Orsini family. As Maria Andaloro pointed out, the Orsini shields shown on the palace refer specifically to a political maneuver by Gian Galeano Orsini, who became pope Nicholas III in 1277.⁶⁹ Charles of Anjou had been appointed sole Senator of Rome for ten years from 1268 to 1278. Pope Nicholas III persuaded Charles to step down after his term ended, and then on July 18, 1278 the pope issued the bull *Fundamenta militantis Ecclesiae*, including a constitution for the city in which the Senator would be elected annually from among the citizens of Rome. Nicholas III himself was elected Senator in September of 1278, although the duties of the office were actually carried out by his nephew, Matteo Rosso Orsini.⁷⁰ As Andaloro argues, the Orsini coats of arms have been found on medieval wall surfaces of the Palazzo Senatorio; Cimabue's heraldic scheme may well have corresponded to the appearance of the palace at the time.

The presence of the Orsini stemma thus provides the strongest evidence for the dating of the mural, most likely painted between the time of his election and the Pope's death, thus between September 1278 and August of 1280. It is telling that Saint Peter's basilica is paired with the Palace of the Senate, signifying the merging of papal and secular authority under the Orsini. While previous pontiffs resided in the Lateran Palace and issued bulls from there, Nicholas III chose to direct his administration from and reside in the Vatican. The Orsini were also proprietors of the Castel Sant'Angelo, so the view Cimabue presents is unquestionably that of an Orsini Rome.

⁶⁷ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 84.

⁶⁸ Marchionibus, 'L'evangelista', pp. 81–93.

⁶⁹ Andaloro, 'Ancora una volta', pp. 143–81.

⁷⁰ Brooke, *The Image of Francis*, p. 348.



Fig. 3.20: Cimabue, 'Ytalia' cityscape, crossing vault (detail), Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

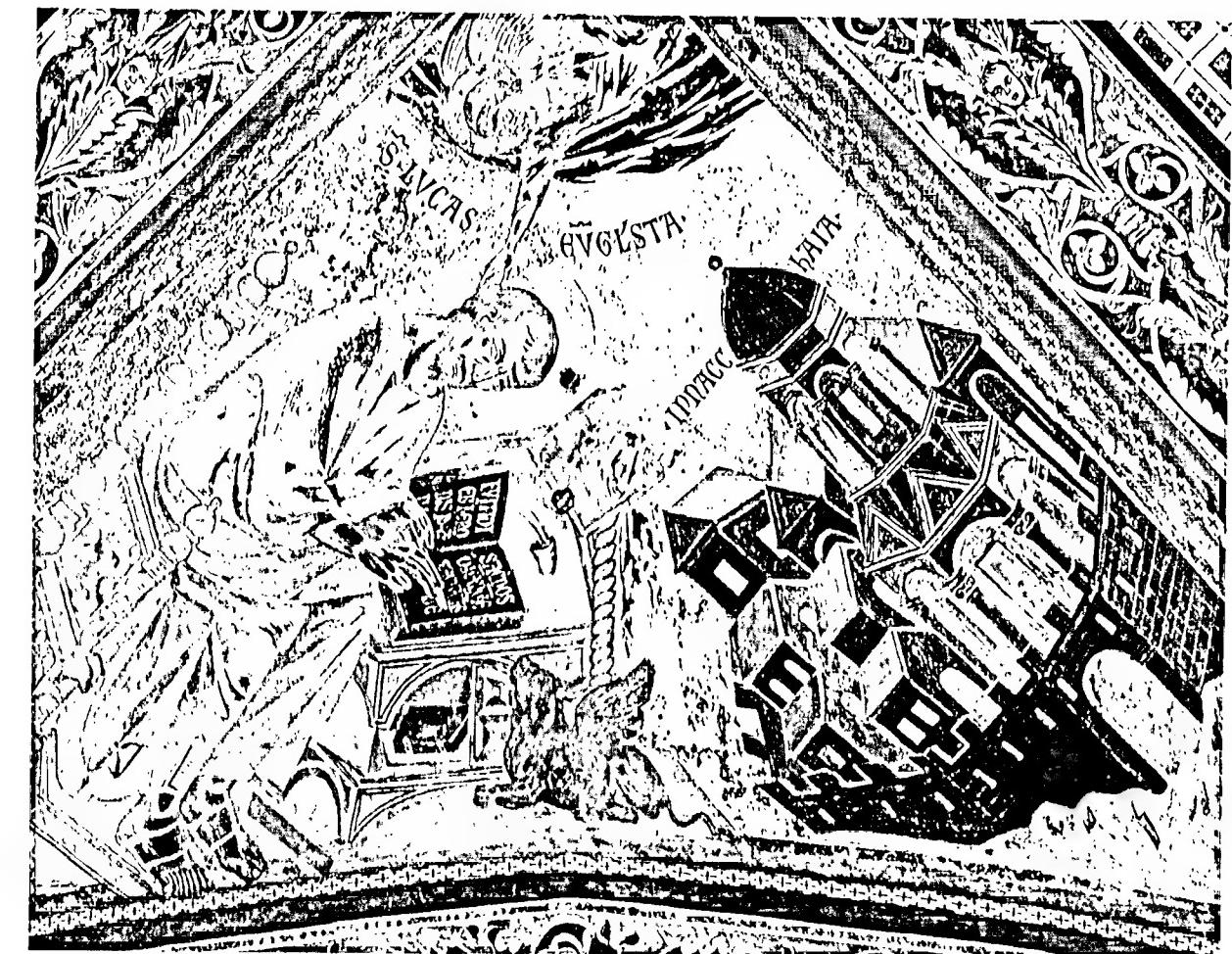


Fig. 3.21: Cimabue, Saint Luke, Evangelists' Vault (detail), crossing vault, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

Almost all studies of the vault at Assisi, however, focus on this Roman vista accompanying Mark and signaling 'Ytalia' and do not discuss the other cityscapes. A consideration of the entire vault is essential to understanding its place within Cimabue's mural programme and its potential significance for the friars. Although the pairing of the Evangelists with cityscapes has precedents in Byzantine art, as seen in the twelfth century mosaics of San Marco in Venice, Cimabue's cityscapes are much more specific than those in other examples. The fact that cities represent particular regions, underscored by the inscriptions Cimabue includes, is in itself an innovation in terms of the iconographic tradition of the Evangelists. All four webs feature buildings of various shapes and sizes enclosed within a crenelated city wall, a standard sign of the medieval urban centre. While the repeated motif of the wall creates a sense of uniformity to the cityscapes, Cimabue also includes specific features marking the uniqueness of each city. In this way, as Herbert L. Kessler has argued in his discussion of the 'Ytalia' cityscape, these representations are effectively portraits of these cities and can be seen within the evolving pre-modern conception of portraiture.⁷¹

As in the 'Ytalia' web, key cities depicted in the other three webs of the vault represent entire territories. The cities in Asia, Greece, and Judea are not as detailed as the image of Rome in the Ytalia vault, but what scholars have failed to notice is that each can be readily identified via the recognizable monuments Cimabue includes.⁷² Luke, for example, is shown with 'Acchaia', an area

⁷¹ Kessler, 'Façade, Face', p. 75. Also on Cimabue's Roman cityscape as an identifiable place, see Bokody, *Images-within-Images*, pp. 62–63.

⁷² Romano, *La Basilica*, p. 105, claims that the other cityscapes are vague representations.



Fig. 3.22: Cimabue, Saint John the Evangelist, Evangelists' Vault (detail), crossing vault, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

of Greece including the Peloponnese, signified by a city likely intended to be Corinth (Fig. 3.21).⁷³ In my view, Cimabue's choice to depict Corinth is a nod to the biblical account of the church there visited by Saint Paul. As a means of specifying the city, Cimabue depicts it dominated by a large, hexagonal domed church characteristic of late Roman and early Byzantine architecture, such as the churches of Santa Costanza in Rome or San Vitale in Ravenna. In John's web of the vault, Asia is represented by Ephesus, the city on the Ionian coast famous for its temple to Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, destroyed in the third century CE (Fig. 3.22).⁷⁴ At the back of the cityscape, Cimabue depicts this temple with its pediment and columns, a detail that also takes into account a monument that would have been visible at the time the Evangelist wrote. In Matthew's vault, Judea is emblemized by Jerusalem, made recognizable by Cimabue's inclusion of the hexagonal temple (Fig. 3.23), similar in form to the Temple Cimabue painted in the scene of Peter Healing the Disabled in the north transept (Fig. 3.24).⁷⁵ The open portico to the left of the

⁷³ On medieval Corinth see Brown, pp. 197–223.

⁷⁴ On this Temple what was known about it during the medieval period see Foss, pp. 86–88.

⁷⁵ See discussion of the depiction of the Temple in the Peter Healing the Disabled mural in Bokody, *Images-within-Images*, pp. 63–66. He does not, however, compare that representation to the one Cimabue painted in the Matthew vault.



Fig. 3.23: Cimabue, Saint Matthew, Evangelists' Vault (detail), crossing vault, Upper Church, Assisi.

Temple in the vault is Solomon's Porch (Fig. 3.23), shown also in the north transept scene of Peter healing the sick and casting out demons (Fig. 3.25). The inclusion of Solomon's Porch is significant for the Franciscans, for according to legend it was the place where the Apostles met following the Crucifixion.⁷⁶

The presentation of prominent, identifying features of each city, coupled with the inscriptions denoting particular regions, therefore testify to an interest in sacred geography on the part of Cimabue and the friars.⁷⁷ The Franciscan Roger Bacon, in his treatise *Opus maius*, a work advocating knowledge of natural philosophy and sent to Pope Clement IV in 1267, defends the study of geography and the making of precise maps for spiritual reasons.⁷⁸ Knowledge of earthly locales, for Bacon, leads to greater knowledge of spiritual realms:

Nobody can doubt that material paths point to journeys of the spirit, or that earthly cities hint at the goals of spiritual roads to parallel spiritual cities. For 'location' has the property of limiting motion from place to place and of setting a boundary to the region around. An understanding of geography, then, gives not only understanding of the words we read, as I have pointed out, but also prepares the way to spiritual understanding.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ For a discussion of the medieval lore of Solomon's porch see Moore, *The Architecture*, pp. 91–93.

⁷⁷ For a recent discussion of the importance of the topography of the Holy Land to the Franciscans, see Moore, *The Architecture*, pp. 133–60.

⁷⁸ See discussions of Roger Bacon's interest in geography in Power, 'The Cosmographical Imagination', pp. 96–97; Woodward with Howe, 'Roger Bacon on Geography', pp. 199–214.

⁷⁹ Bacon, *The Fourth Part*, trans. Howe (online); <https://www.geography.wisc.edu/histcart/bacon.html>.

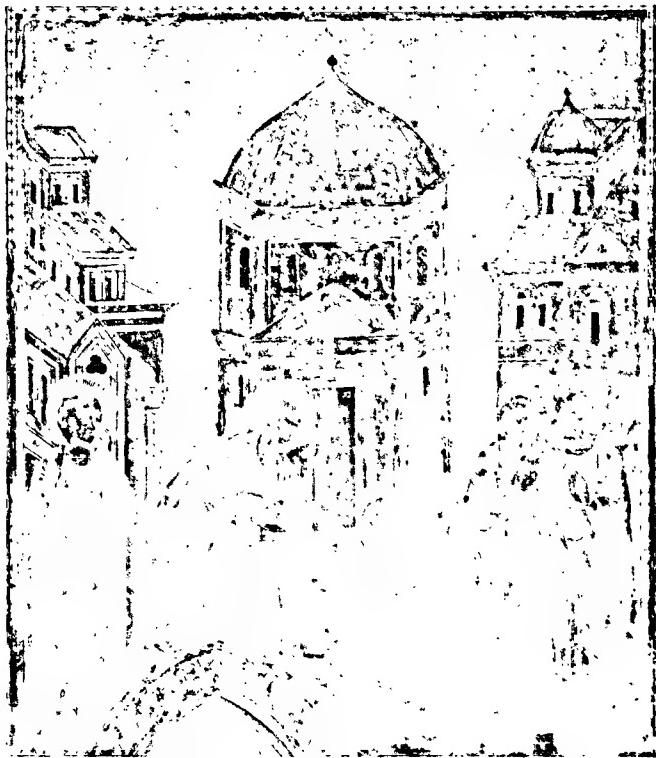


Fig. 3.24: Cimabue, *Peter Healing the Disabled*, north transept, Upper Church, Assisi.



Fig. 3.25: Cimabue, *Peter Healing the Sick and Demon Possessed*, north transept, Upper Church, Assisi.

Further, Bacon remarks that the understanding the topography of sacred places once traversed by the saints is a key to understanding the scriptures:

If someone hears the stories whose scenes are the regions around the River Jordan, Jericho and its plain, Mount Olivet, the Valley of Josaphat, and Jerusalem, without a picture in his mind of the regions and what they are like, he simply cannot know even the literal meaning of the story, and, naturally, the sequence of history will hold no pleasure for him, and its spiritual meaning will also remain hidden. But if he knows their latitudes and longitudes, their heights and depths; their varied peculiarities of hot and cold, dry and damp, and the effects of their mixtures of these four (solid and tenuous, rough and smooth, dry and wet, slippery, and any number of others defined in Aristotle's *Meteorology* 4), not to mention their colours, tastes, smells, their beauty or ugliness, their charm, their sterility or fertility, their progress to perfection or decay, and the qualities opposite to all these, which must be considered for each place—if, I say, he knows all these, he will be able to grasp and delight in the pure and literal sense of the Scriptures, and be able to advance with pride and confidence to their spiritual meaning.⁸⁰

The attention Cimabue pays to certain recognizable landmarks in each city he depicts thus aims at communicating the experience of the actual locales where the Evangelists were writing. Such an understanding then might enrich a viewer's comprehension of the meaning of the texts produced there.

The idea that the depiction of particular places could enhance spiritual understanding is similarly revealed in maps that survive from the period. Marcia Kupfer's recent investigations of

⁸⁰ Bacon, *The Fourth Part*, trans. Howe (online); <https://www.geography.wisc.edu/histcart/bacon.html>.

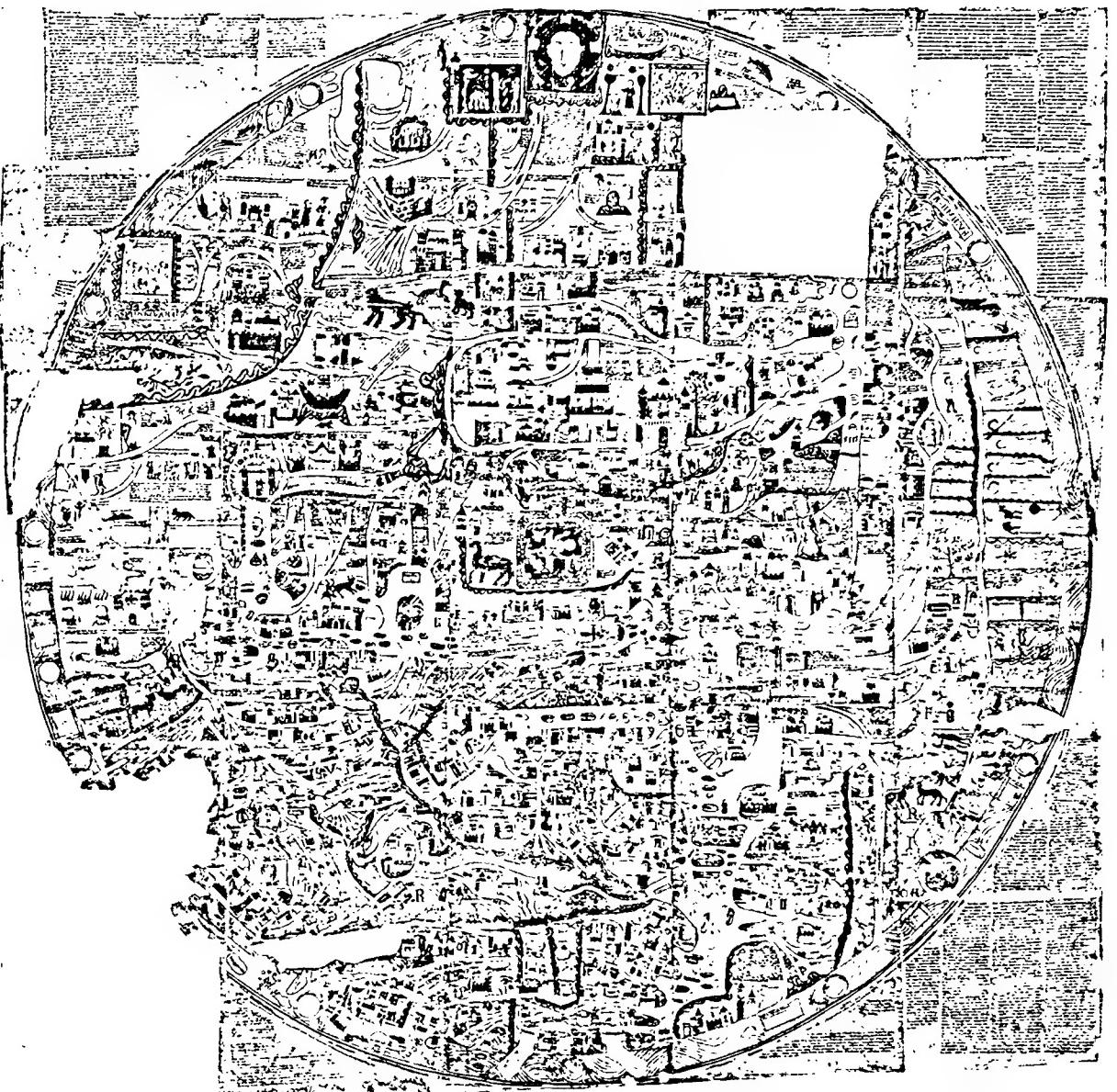


Fig. 3.26: Ebstorf Mappa Mundi (now destroyed), Tempera on goatskin, 350 x 350 cm.

the now-lost Ebstorf map, produced c. 1300 for a Benedictine nunnery (Fig. 3.26), posit that this large *mappa mundi* was intended as a means of contemplating the divine through the perception of the visible world. On it, an image of Christ crucified is superimposed on a map of the cities of the known world with Jerusalem at its centre. Christ's head emerges from the top, his hands stretch out from the sides, and his feet dangle from the bottom. The sacred locales of the world are arranged radially, progressing outward from Jerusalem, with sites linked to the Apostles placed within the inner circles. As Kupfer argues, the map therefore indexes the spread of the gospel throughout the world, and in its circular conception, connotes the Eucharist, with its wafer-shaped presentation of a world mapped onto Christ's body.⁸¹ Cimabue perhaps knew similar cartographic models; in the earlier medieval period, world maps were displayed, for example, in two dining halls in the Lateran Palace in Rome, one probably in fresco dating to the papacy of Zacharias (741–52) and the other in mosaic from the time of Leo III (795–816).⁸² Their exact form is unknown, but it is thought

⁸¹ Kupfer, 'Reflections in the Ebstorf Map', pp. 112–13.

⁸² Belting, 'Die beiden', pp. 55–83; Iacobini, 'Il mosaico', pp. 189–96; Walter, 'Papal Political Imagery', pp. 155–76.

that images of Christ's Apostolic ministry surrounded these world maps. Although Cimabue's vault at Assisi is not structured as a map precisely, its evocation of geographic specificity activated similar responses in viewers. Its position over the high altar would also connect its topographical imagery to the Eucharist. Christ's transubstantiated body would be continuously present during the celebration of mass below, canopied by a map of sorts of the places where the Word of God in written form was first conceived and disseminated. The celebration of the Eucharist also re-enacts the sacrifice of Christ in various times and places in the same way that Cimabue's vault imagery represents multiple geographic and temporal events.

The choice to depict cities along with the portraits of the four Evangelists is also certainly connected to Franciscan ideas of conversion and mission. Francis' own targeted missionary zeal began in the earliest days of the Order. In the *Legenda maior*, Bonaventure details how as soon as his band of brothers numbered eight, Francis sent out his friars in pairs to the four corners of the world to preach.⁸³ Eugenio Battisti proposed that Cimabue's delineation of four distinct regions of the earth in the Evangelists vault alludes specifically to the Franciscan missionary party of four friars and two other companions that was sent to the East in 1278.⁸⁴ Serena Romano instead argued that the vault is more broadly ideological, referring to the 'question of the "East"' as a missionary goal of the Franciscans. The Crusades had brought to a head the conflicts not only between Muslims and Christians but also between the Latin and Orthodox Christians. Francis himself expressed his desires for converting Muslims in the Levant, a mission the Franciscans continued. Members of the Order including Bonaventure spearheaded discussions at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 in an attempt to reunite the Latin and Orthodox churches.⁸⁵ Although these concerns were important to the Franciscans, an explanation for the choices of locales may be more straightforward, since, as noted above, each Evangelist appears with the territory where, according to tradition, his text was composed.⁸⁶ The Evangelists themselves are directly connected to the success of their inspired texts. Each faces the city where his text was destined to be heard, almost as if he is envisioning the ideal city within each land. Such imagery would, however, have in turn inspired the friars in their own efforts to spread the word of God through preaching and missionary efforts. The Franciscans, who emerged at a time of urbanization, focused their ministry primarily on cities, as did the other mendicant orders, for it was in cities that one would find the highest concentration of souls in need of spiritual support from the friars.⁸⁷

Cimabue therefore portrays the Evangelists as ministers bringing the 'Word made flesh' to the world's cities, just as the Franciscans set out to do. The Order's missionary zeal can also be tied directly to Francis' early devotion to Mary. Francis invoked the Virgin as the Order's Advocate, and as such she became the holy backer of the Order, helping to ensure its success. And Mary was behind Francis' first notions of what he and his brothers should do, that is their form of life. According to the *Legenda maior*, Francis

Through the merits of the Mother of Mercy he conceived and brought to birth the spirit of the Gospel truth. One day while he was devoutly hearing a Mass of the Apostles, that Gospel was read in which Christ sends out his disciples to preach and gives them the Gospel form of life, that they may not keep gold or silver or money in their belts nor have a wallet for their journey, nor may they have two tunics, nor shoes, nor staff. Hearing, understanding, and committing this to memory, the lover of Apostolic poverty was then overwhelmed with an indescribable joy. 'This is what I want', he said, 'this is what I desire with all my heart'.⁸⁸

⁸³ Bonaventure, *LM* 3:7, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 546.

⁸⁴ Battisti, *Cimabue*, p. 39.

⁸⁵ Romano, *La Basilica*, p. 103.

⁸⁶ See Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 82, for discussion of

medieval traditions about the locations where each Gospel was composed.

⁸⁷ Bruzelius, *Preaching, Building*, p. 112.

⁸⁸ Bonaventure, *LM*, 3:1, in FAED vol. 2, pp.

That the followers of Francis should go out into the world and preach while imitating the poverty of the Apostles was a revelation to Francis, one he 'conceived and gave birth to' just as Mary conceived and gave birth to Christ. The Evangelists vault with its celebratory cityscapes, placed above the high altar and adjacent to the Marian imagery in the apse, thus brought together visually the Franciscan's apostolic mission, their incarnational theology and their devotion to Mary. As the following chapter will demonstrate, Marian devotion continued to be a leitmotif for the Franciscans as they sought to commemorate their Order's foundation.

CHAPTER 4

Place and Memory: The Franciscan Maestà

Another time at Saint Mary of the Porziuncola the man of God was offered a sheep, which he gratefully accepted in his love of that innocence and simplicity which the sheep by its nature reflects. The pious man admonished the little sheep to praise God attentively and to avoid giving any offense to the brothers. The sheep carefully observed his instructions, as if it recognized the piety of the man of God. For when it heard the brothers chanting in choir, it would enter the church, genuflect without instructions from anyone, and bleat before the altar of the Virgin, the mother of the Lamb, as if it wished to greet her.¹

This charming account from Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* highlights the piety Saint Francis inspired in all who encountered him, including humble creatures like the sheep. With its allusions to Christ as the biblical good shepherd, it is another example of Bonaventure's portrayal of Francis' full conformity to Christ.² Followers of Christ, and devotees of Francis, were to do what the sheep does when entering the church—genuflect and praise Mary before her altar. This anecdote hints that the laity, represented by the sheep, approached an altar, but listened as the friars chanted in a separate space 'in their choir'. The tiny church of Saint Mary (known as Santa Maria degli Angeli at the Porziuncola) mentioned in the above anecdote was perhaps too small to contain distinct worship spaces and multiple altars, but in larger mendicant churches, a walled screen with openings, or at the very least a wooden beam, could divide the friars' choir or the *ecclesia fratrum*, usually situated near the high altar, from the church of the laity, or *ecclesia laicorum*.³ In such churches, images of Mary often decorated the *ecclesia laicorum*. Especially popular were monumental paintings of the Virgin and Child Enthroned, called a Maestà. The mendicant orders encouraged the formation of lay confraternities that gathered to sing hymns of praise to the Virgin in front of such large-scale image of her. A Maestà could also be the object of the friars' adoration, for Mary figured prominently in their devotional practices. Francis himself composed two litanies greeting the Virgin and celebrating her virtues, and in his Office of the Passion, the friars concluded their Psalm recitation for each hour with an Antiphon to Mary.⁴ Adored by lay and clerical audiences alike, the painted Maestà became a standard feature in the churches of Italy by the late thirteenth century.

Cimabue painted at least four such large-scale Marian images, two of which were created for the Franciscans: a fresco in the Lower Church at Assisi (Fig. 4.1) and a large panel of the same subject for the church of San Francesco in Pisa, now in the Louvre (Fig. 4.2). As noted in the Introduction,

1 Bonaventure, *LM* 8.7, in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 591.

2 DRB, Luke 15:1–7.

3 For choir screens and their function in Franciscan contexts see Cooper, 'Access all areas', pp. 90–107, and in Dominican churches, see Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 29–45.

4 For the Office of Passion used by the Franciscans in the thirteenth century and attributed in part to Francis, see *FAED*, vol. 1, pp. 139–60. For Francis' salutation of the Virgin and his salutation of the Virtues (the manuscript tradition of which suggests they apply to Mary as well), see *FAED*, vol. 1, pp. 163–65.





Fig. 4.1: Cimabue, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saint Francis*, Lower Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

past scholarship on these paintings focused on Cimabue's place in the narrative of emerging optical realism at the end of the thirteenth century. More recent research on the function of monumental Madonnas has analyzed works by Duccio and Giotto, but scholars have not considered fully the religious contexts of Cimabue's large Marian images.⁵ In this chapter, I situate Cimabue's Franciscan depictions of the Maestà in terms of the Order's wish to emphasize Francis' particular affinity for Mary. His privileged relationship with her was tied to a specific site: Santa Maria degli Angeli at the Porziuncola. As will be explained further below, it was at the Porziuncola that the Order began, and that some of the most significant events of Francis' life took place, including miracles such as the one about the sheep cited above. Cimabue was tasked with creating a Franciscan version of the enthroned Madonna for the basilica at Assisi, one commemorating the Order's beginnings at the Porziuncola. Understanding Cimabue's Lower Church Madonna as part of a constructed narrative of the Order's origins also enables a new interpretation of the massive panel painted for the friars at San Francesco in Pisa and now in the Louvre (Fig. 4.2). In it, Cimabue's repeats his innovative iconography, forging a visual link between the Porziuncola, Assisi, and the convent in Pisa. Cimabue's enthroned Madonnas can also be seen as products of competition between the mendicant orders, who looked to produce their own 'signature' Madonna type, one that advertised their individual brand of Marian devotion.

⁵ Cimabue's depiction of the throne at an oblique angle to the picture plane, seen in both the Assisi and Pisa Madonnas, has been seen as a perspectival experiment within the early

Renaissance teleology of naturalism. For a summary of the arguments for the dating of both paintings, see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 274–75 and p. 277.



Fig. 4.2: Cimabue, *Virgin and Child in Majesty*, Tempera and gold on wood, 424 x 276 cm, Louvre, Paris.

My arguments about Cimabue's Franciscan versions of the Maestà are informed by the notion that images can be sites of commemoration, designed to aid worshippers in remembering specific events or places.⁶ Cimabue's monumental Marian images adorned churches, where commemoration was central to Christian religious practices. Entering a Christian church in the late thirteenth century, one would be surrounded by commemorative monuments and images. Ecclesiastical spaces were filled with tombs of saints, clerics, and laypeople, whom the mendicants increasingly allowed to be buried within their churches.⁷ Relics provided tangible remains of saints, and images of biblical figures and saints served as visual reminders of the Christian past. The liturgical rites performed on saints' feast days and Masses said in honor of the more recently departed dead likewise made remembering the past a constant exercise of the present. The celebration of Mass, the central act of Christian worship in the period, itself is an act of commemoration; it derives from Christ's institution of the Last Supper, done as 'in remembrance of me' as he instructs in I Corinthians 11:23–26. The rituals performed in churches helped to engender memories shared by a society, or what Maurice Halbwachs called 'collective memory'.⁸ Related terms for this concept include 'cultural memory' or 'social memory'; these acknowledge the cultural practice of making individual memory social by addressing texts, rituals, art, or other media to groups.⁹ At Assisi and elsewhere, the Franciscans were keenly aware of the power of images to shape collective memory, both that of the Orders' members and the lay audiences they served. This shared memory helped to construct a common identity centred on the events and people fundamental to the Order. As noted in the Introduction, commemoration was absolutely crucial to the Franciscans' promotion of Francis himself. It is for this reason that early on, the Franciscans commissioned *vita* panels of the saint, designed as *memoria*, objects recalling the saint's holy acts.¹⁰ My proposal here is that Cimabue was engaged in a similar exercise in his creation of novel Marian images designed to spur collective memory of the Franciscan Order, its founder and its history. To understand the commemorative nature of the Franciscan Maestà, it is first necessary to return to Assisi.

The Lower Church Maestà

Given Francis' evident fondness for Mary, it comes as no surprise that a Marian image is one of the most celebrated images in Assisi today: Cimabue's Madonna and Child with Saint Francis (Fig. 4.1). Painted in the north transept of the Lower Church of Saint Francis at the end of the thirteenth century, Cimabue's fresco depicts the Virgin with the Christ Child on her lap, seated on a throne. Depicted as though fashioned from intricately lathed wood and draped with a luxurious brocade cloth of honor, the throne, presented on a diagonal to the picture plane, frames the regal Virgin as she rests on a plump cushion. She holds the blessing infant Christ on her lap while four angels accompany her, standing in pairs on either side of the throne. At the viewer's right, separated slightly from the Madonna, a figure of Francis stands holding a book. His hands and feet display the wounds of the stigmata, and his tunic is torn open to reveal the wound in his side.

Today, Cimabue's fresco is an international symbol of Franciscan devotion for tourists and pilgrims, reproduced on trinkets and postcards in souvenir shops. The Madonna's status as a favored image seems to have been established quite early, for it was spared in the early fourteenth

6 For a historiographic review of research on medieval memory see Brenner et al., *Memory and Commemoration*, pp. 1–4.

Remembrance.

8 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*.

9 Assmann, *Cultural Memory*; Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, pp. ix–x.

10 Bordua, *The Franciscans*, p. 2, note 5.



Fig. 4.3: View of north east wall of Lower Church transept, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

century when painters from Giotto's workshop updated the north transept with a new cycle of frescoes that still surround it (Fig. 4.3). Cimabue's Madonna was also restored and repainted several times over the centuries, interventions that, unfortunately, obscured most of his original brushstrokes and colour scheme. Such attempts to preserve it, however, attest to the longstanding reverence accorded to this image. And yet despite this traditional esteem, Cimabue's Lower Church Maestà has never been adequately analyzed in context; studies have instead concentrated on its possible place within Cimabue's oeuvre.¹¹

I propose that Cimabue's Madonna with Saint Francis was created as a reminder of the beginnings of the Order and in celebration of Francis and his earliest followers. My argument is based on the evident concern in the Basilica at Assisi for commemorating the Porziuncola, the first true home of the Order and the place where Francis, at his request, died. By the time Cimabue was painting, the Porziuncola and its small chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli had become a major pilgrimage destination. There, a papal indulgence known as the *Perdono* was offered, granting pilgrims complete remission of sins committed up to that point.¹² Pilgrims coming for the *Perdono* would also visit the Basilica, the final resting place of Saint Francis, and so the friars forged visual and administrative connections between the two pilgrimage sites. My new reading of Cimabue's fresco as an intentional reminder of Santa Maria degli Angeli has been enabled by recent research on the significance of the Porziuncola in the pilgrimage culture of Assisi in the late thirteenth century. Studies by Donal Cooper and Janet Robson demonstrate how the architecture and decoration of the Lower Church reveal the friars' desire to promote pilgrimage.¹³ Furthermore, Chiara Frugoni has argued convincingly that the themes chosen for the apse and transepts of the Upper Church of Saint Francis, also painted by Cimabue just upstairs from his Lower Church Madonna, deliberately recalled the Order's origins at the Porziuncola.¹⁴ I propose that the Madonna was designed by Cimabue as an emblem of that locus as well, and as such, it represented the formative days of the Order and Francis' love for Mary, relevant to the friars in the Sacro Convento as well as to pilgrims. In what follows, I will first discuss briefly the fresco's position within the church and what that means for its evolving viewership, and then move to an analysis of the connections between Cimabue's image and the sacred site of Santa Maria degli Angeli at the Porziuncola.

Context and Audiences

Because there is no documentary evidence for Cimabue's commission, various proposals for the fresco's date are based mostly on connoisseurship studies.¹⁵ It has also been noted that Cimabue's depiction of the throne in the Lower Church closely resembles that in his Pisa Madonna (Fig. 4.2), which some scholars date to the mid 1280s based on its visual affinities to Duccio's Rucellai Madonna, documented in 1285 (Fig. 4.4).¹⁶ In my view, Cimabue's Madonna with Saint Francis was most likely executed during his stay at Assisi under the pontificate of Nicholas III or shortly thereafter, thus between 1277–85. But the dating issue may never be conclusively resolved due to the painting's extremely compromised condition. It has been heavily repainted, retouched

¹¹ For a summary of the literature on this painting as well as a bibliography see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 277–78, and further Monciatti, 'Madonna col Bambino', pp. 426–29.

¹² For a discussion of the history and traditions surrounding the *Perdono* see Ratzinger, *Il Perdono*.

¹³ Donal Cooper and Janet Robson, 'Imagery and the Economy', pp. 165–86, and Robson, 'The Pilgrim's Progress', pp. 39–70.

¹⁴ Frugoni, 'L'ombra', pp. 353–61, and further discussion in Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 119–26.

¹⁵ For the issue of dating see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 227–30.

¹⁶ My thoughts on the dating and the chronology of the Madonnas by Cimabue and Duccio concord with those in Stubblebine, 'Byzantine influence', pp. 96–97.



Fig. 4.4: Duccio, *Madonna and Child Enthroned* (Rucellai Madonna), Tempera and gold on wood, 450 x 290 cm, Uffizi, Florence.

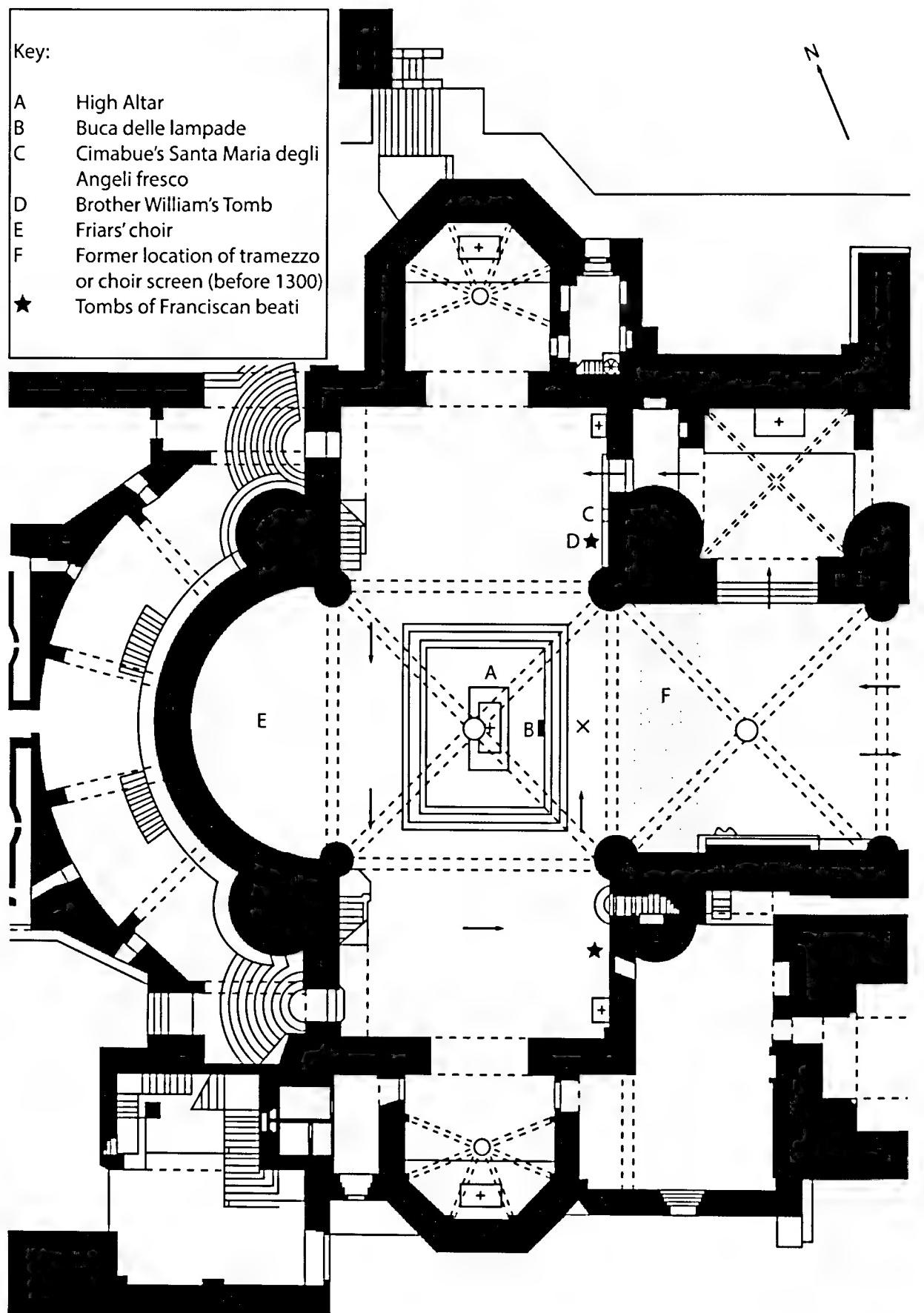


Fig. 4.5: Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, Plan of Lower Church transepts and apse.

or restored at least three times over the centuries. The first recorded restoration dates to 1587, and the painting was repainted again in 1872–73.¹⁷ Another conservation project carried out in the 1970s by the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro of Rome attempted to remove these later layers of paint, but discovered that almost none of the original surface remained beneath them.¹⁸ What viewers see today is mostly a nineteenth-century imagining of the faces, with scant traces of the original modeling of the drapery. Despite the painting's poor preservation, scholars are largely in agreement as to its attribution to Cimabue, but are less sure as to whether or not he designed his Madonna and Saint Francis to stand on its own or whether it was part of a larger cycle painted in the Lower Church transepts by him or others.¹⁹ Some have also suggested that a pendant figure of a saint stood on the other side of the Madonna, perhaps Clare of Assisi or Anthony of Padua.²⁰ If Cimabue painted additional scenes or figures, they were covered in the early fourteenth century when Giotto's workshop executed the frescoes illustrating the Infancy of Christ and the Crucifixion that now surround Cimabue's work.²¹ Cimabue's Madonna is positioned rather awkwardly within the new scheme; the wings of the angels at the left were truncated in the re-painting of the wall and the Madonna's halo intersects oddly with the later painted border (Fig. 4.3). The desire to preserve this image must have taken priority over such aesthetic anomalies.

Because of its position on the east wall of the north transept of the Lower Church, the fresco would have been viewed most frequently by the friars in the Sacro Convento. Until the late thirteenth century, this western end of the basilica was separated from the nave by a stone choir screen or *tramezzo* demarcating the sanctuary around the high altar (Fig. 4.5).²² Pilgrims would have heard Mass celebrated at the high altar from the outside of this barrier while the friars celebrated the Eucharist from within it. Inside the friars' church, as the space beyond the barrier was called, the friars celebrated mass at additional altars located there. Cimabue's Madonna was designed as an altarpiece for a Marian altar in the north transept. Early documentation for this altar is scant, but it probably dates from the time of friar Elias, thus to the 1230s, shortly after Francis' body was brought to the newly constructed church.²³ The painting's placement, on the reverse-facing wall of the transept, mirrors the arrangement of mural altarpieces in the Upper Church, where Cimabue's two monumental crucifixion murals are painted behind the altar blocks on the east walls of the north and south transepts (Fig. 4.6).²⁴ At the time Cimabue painted his frescoes in that space, c. 1277–80, the Upper Church was arranged similarly to the Lower Church, with a *tramezzo* separating the apse and transepts from the nave. As mentioned previously, scholars have speculated that Cimabue's Madonna formed part of a larger cycle of images painted by Cimabue or others in the transepts of the Lower Church. However, because the image was conceived as an altarpiece, as were Cimabue's two crucifixions in the Upper Church, it could have easily stood on its own.²⁵ As in the apse of the Upper Church, likewise a liturgical focal point and where Cimabue's murals celebrate Mary's death and Assumption, the enthroned Mary downstairs might prompt the friars to meditate on her role in the Incarnation.

¹⁷ Although scholars have speculated that the painting was retouched as early as the fourteenth century, the first recorded restoration dates to 1587 by Guido da Gubbio, and the painting was repainted again in 1872–73 by Guglielmo Botti. See Monciatti, 'Madonna col Bambino', pp. 426–29.

¹⁸ For portions of the 1973 restoration report see Sindona, *Cimabue*, pp. 87–88.

¹⁹ In his description of the Basilica written between 1570 and 1580, friar Ludovico di Pietralunga remarked of Cimabue's Madonna: 'They say it was not destroyed [guasto] like the others'. Ludovico di Pietralunga, *Descrizione*, p. 70. Restoration work in the transepts has also revealed traces of earlier decoration, but not enough to be sure that additional paintings were completed. See Andaloro, 'Tracce', pp. 77–100.

²⁰ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 230.

²¹ On the fourteenth century frescoes in the north transept of the Lower Church see for example Lunghi, *The Basilica*, p. 100.

²² Due to the building's position within Assisi, and in emulation of Roman basilicas, the Basilica is oriented to the west rather than the east. Evidence for the original liturgical furnishings in the apse and transepts is lacking, but most likely the choir stalls were located between the high altar and the apse until the early fourteenth century. On this space see Hueck, 'Der Lettner', pp. 173–202.

²³ Monciatti, 'Madonna col Bambino', p. 426.

²⁴ On the Upper Church Crucifixions see Chapter 2, as well as Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 85.

²⁵ For the two Crucifixions in the Upper Church see Romano, *La Basilica*, pp. 77–02.

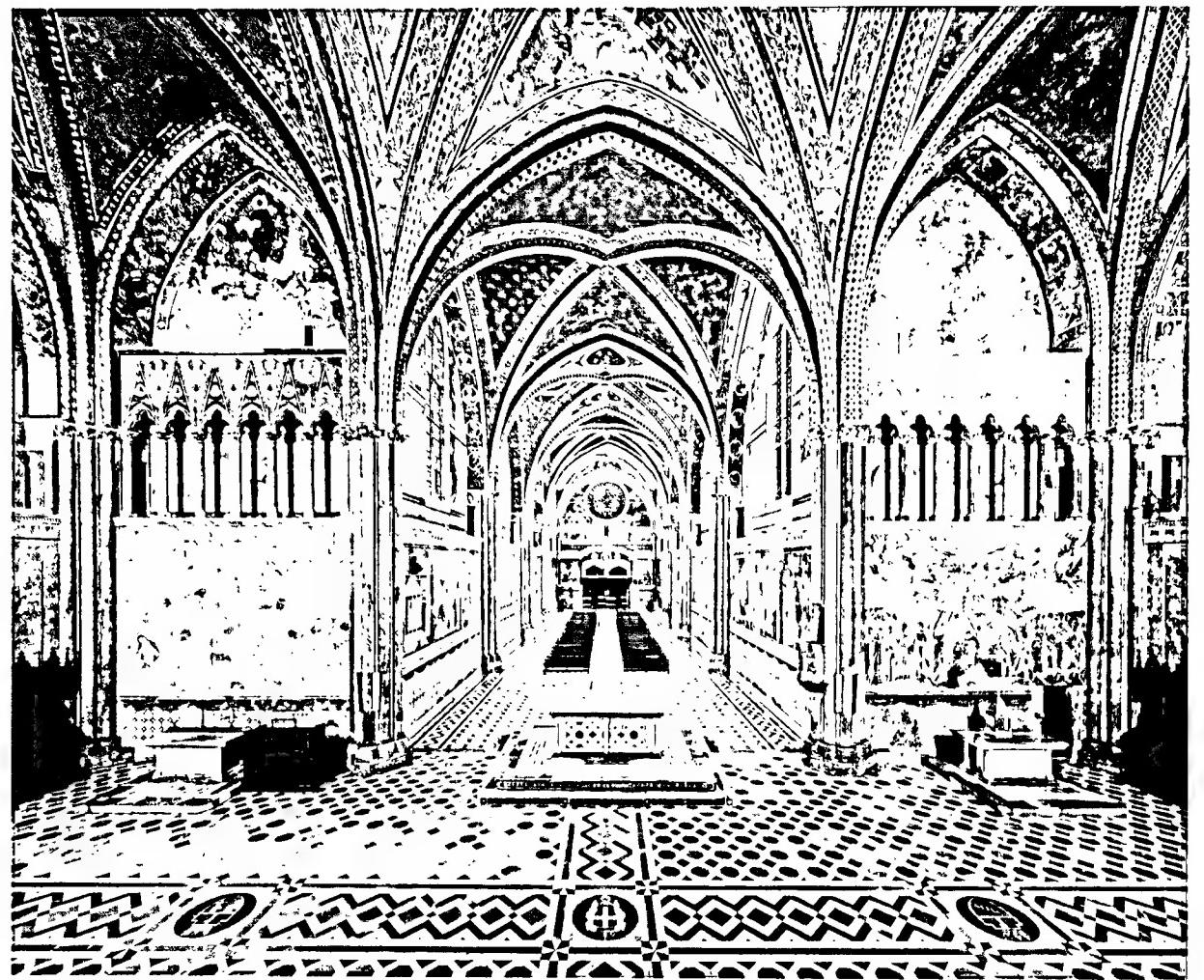


Fig. 4.6: View of nave and transepts facing east, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

The friars could also contemplate Cimabue's Madonna outside of liturgical celebrations. Placed on the east wall of the north transept, facing west, it is among the first images a friar might glimpse when entering the transept from the Sacro Convento on the west side of the church. Passing from the door located on the west wall, opposite the fresco, the friars may have stopped to salute Mary or sing a hymn of praise, modeling their devotion on Francis, who composed a hymn to Mary with which he greeted every image of the Virgin he saw.²⁶ Hans Belting has argued that Cimabue's Crucifixion murals in the Upper Church served a devotional function aimed at the friars, who were to envision themselves in the position of the kneeling Francis featured at the foot of the cross, meditating on Christ's death (Fig. 4.7).²⁷ Similarly dispositioned in the Lower Church, Cimabue's Madonna with Francis may also have inspired the friars to contemplate Francis' special relationship to Mary via the adjacent image of the saint. Again, Cimabue's murals in the Upper Church offer kindred iconography; as pointed out in Chapter 3, the enthroned Mary in the apse is shown as intercessor and advocate of the Order, with her outstretched right hand open to Francis and his friars as she presents them to Christ (Fig. 4.8).²⁸ Francis' presence alongside the Madonna in the Lower Church offered yet another means for the friars to forge an intimate connection to Mary in emulation of their founder.

²⁶ Francis of Assisi, *A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, in FAED, vol. 1, 163.

²⁷ Hans Belting, *Die Oberkirche*, p. 53.

²⁸ On the Marian imagery in the apse see Chapter 3, as well as Lavin, 'Cimabue at Assisi', pp. 95–112.

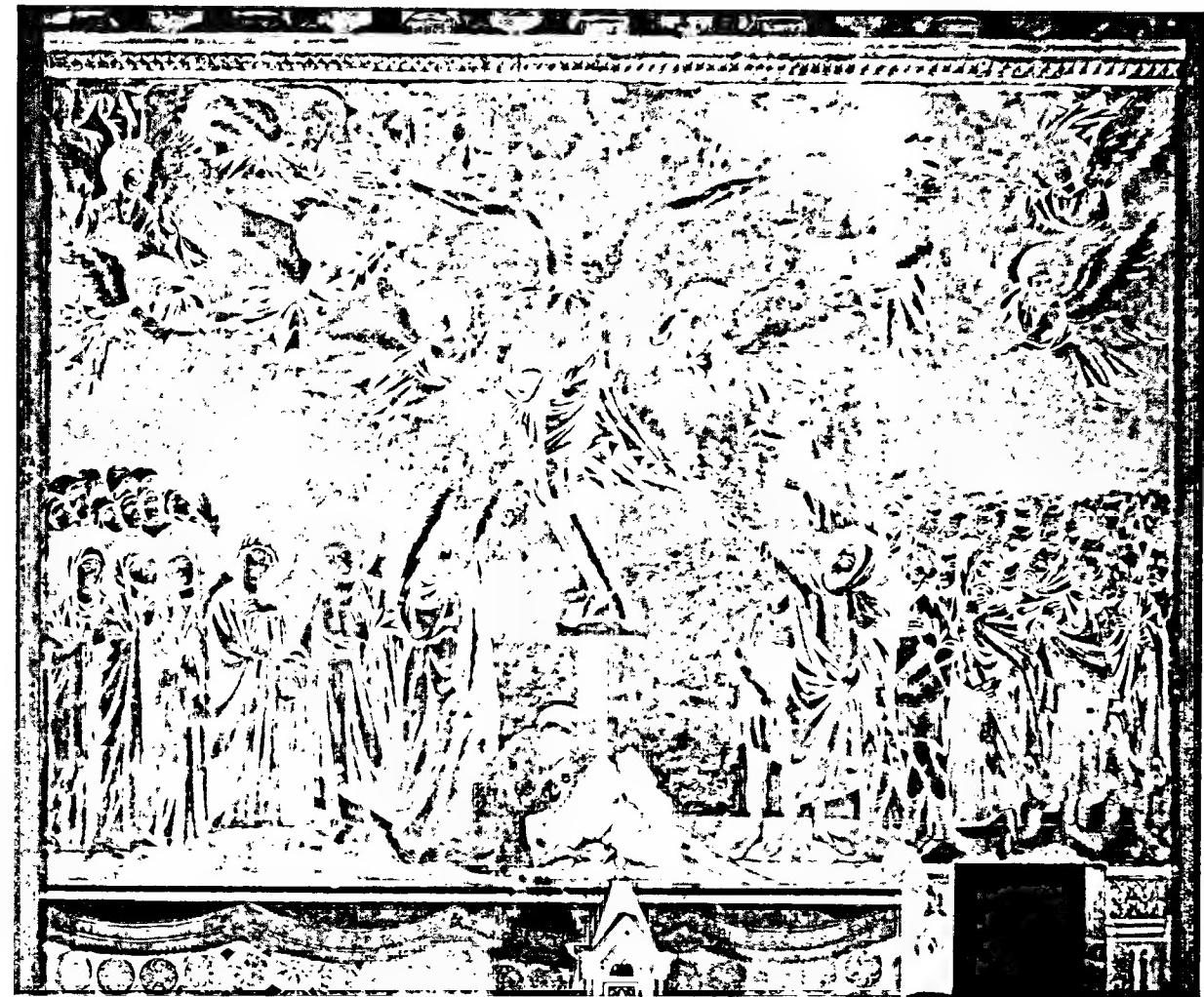


Fig. 4.7: Cimabue, *Crucifixion*, south transept, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

In the Lower Church, the figure of Francis is positioned to the viewer's right of the Madonna, and may have been the image in the friars' church that was physically closest to the tomb of Francis, who was buried beneath the high altar. A depiction of Francis would have been highly desirable here, given the inaccessibility of Francis' tomb. Francis's body had been translated to the Church on May 25 1230. In contrast to the exposed shrines of many other popular medieval saints, Francis' tomb was buried deep within the rock beneath the high altar, his body interred in an impermeable, sealed chamber without points of access.²⁹ Such a burial was in imitation of early Christian martyrs, such as Saint Peter, but had the added advantage of protecting the precious relics from the constant threat of theft, or *furta sacra*.³⁰ Pilgrims could only view Francis' final resting place via a small opening known as the *buca delle lampade* at the base of the high altar, where flickering lamplight would have illuminated the chamber below.³¹ With the *tramezzo* in place in front of the transepts and high altar, pilgrims had to approach the shrine from the nave.³² Devotees could contemplate the scenes from Francis' life painted by the Maestro di San Francesco, and may have also viewed

²⁹ On the tomb of Francis see Cooper, 'In loco', pp. 1–37, and further Gerhard Ruf, *Das Grab*.

³⁰ A recent study proposes that the friars wished to strengthen the notion of Francis as an *alter christus* by emulating Jerusalem in the Basilica's art and architecture,

thereby encouraging pilgrimage to the Basilica. See Moore, *The Architecture*, pp. 124–30.

³¹ Cooper, 'In loco', p. 20.

³² Cooper 'In loco', p. 22.



Fig. 4.8: Cimabue, *Virgin and Christ Enthroned*, apse, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

an early *vita* panel of Francis displayed near the high altar.³³ The friars, who worshipped on the other side of the *tramezzo*, must have desired images of Francis in their space as well. Cimabue's Madonna perhaps aided their veneration of Francis' relics, signaling his bodily presence within their space.

Despite the *tramezzo* that stood between the friars' church and the laity in the late thirteenth century, laypeople and pilgrims entered the transepts at certain times; as previously mentioned, recent studies indicate that the spaces behind such barriers were quite permeable. Laypeople met

³³ The *vita* panel, now in the museum of the Sacro Convento, was probably located somewhere near the tomb of Francis, but its depiction of miracle scenes indicates that pilgrims may have been the panel's primary audience. William Cook associates it with dedication of the high altar of the Lower

Church in 1253, see Cook, *Images of Saint Francis*, cat. no. 27, pp. 62–63. On the problem of the date of the Maestro di San Francesco's work in the Lower Church see Cannon, 'Redating the Frescoes', pp. 437–49.

in ecclesiastical spaces near the high altar to sign important documents, for example, or on certain feast days.³⁴ Evidence for the presence of pilgrims in the transepts early in the Basilica's history is the legendary account of how Elias of Cortona commanded the departed Brother William of England, who died in 1232 and was buried in the north transept, to stop performing miracles out of reverence for Francis.³⁵ Brother William's tomb in the north transept would have been much more accessible than that of the Basilica's namesake; Francis was buried so deeply beneath the rock that Renaissance accounts speculated that the friars had deliberately hidden Francis' body.³⁶ Brother Elias' command to William of England testifies to the friars' fear that the inaccessibility of Francis' body was hindering the thaumaturgic power of the saint.³⁷ Fewer miracles were recorded in the Lower Church in the middle of the thirteenth century than had been noted in the years immediately following the saint's death, when his coffin was displayed at the church of San Giorgio while awaiting construction of the Basilica.³⁸ Unlike at San Giorgio and in other pilgrimage churches elsewhere in Europe, devotees could not get close to or circulate around Francis' tomb in the Lower Church. Crowd control in the Lower Church was also an issue, since pilgrims could only venerate Francis' shrine at the high altar from the nave. Even if allowed behind the barrier on occasion, pilgrims probably found this arrangement of the Lower Church confining and disappointing.

It was therefore in effort to create more fluid access to Francis' shrine that the friars decided to remove the *tramezzo* at the end of the thirteenth century. The friars then constructed a series of side chapels on the north side of the Lower Church, with a passageway through those chapels into the north transept. As Janet Robson has proposed, this new configuration allowed pilgrims to circulate in a counterclockwise direction through the north transept and behind the high altar.³⁹ While this did not fully solve the problem of the lack of access to Francis' relics, it did prompt the creation of an ambitious fresco programme offering new visual stimuli for both pilgrims and friars. Giotto and Pietro Lorenzetti were among the famous artists tapped for the re-decoration of the north transept. During this renovation campaign, Cimabue's Madonna was kept and incorporated into the new scheme (Fig. 4.3). Cimabue may have had the friars in mind when he painted his Madonna, but his image became viewed consistently by a wider public of pilgrims once the transepts were opened. What scholars have not explained fully, however, is why Cimabue's Madonna was saved, particularly when the same care was not taken with other earlier paintings in the Lower Church. The frescoes illustrating the life of Francis by the Saint Francis Master, for example, were partly compromised when doorways were created in the nave to allow access to the new chapels.⁴⁰ Cimabue's Madonna must have already been the object of special devotion, a status derived, I contend, from its allusions to the foundation of the Franciscan Order. Those references are found both in the painting's innovative iconography and in its position within the newly reconfigured pilgrimage church.

³⁴ See the discussions of accessibility with Franciscan churches in Israëls, 'Painting for a Preacher', pp. 128–30, and Cooper, 'Access All Areas?', pp. 90–107.

³⁵ *Chronica XXIV Generalium*, p. 217. See discussion of this anecdote in Robson, 'The Pilgrim's Progress', p. 51; Cooper, 'In loco', p. 32; Frugoni, 'L'ombra', pp. 353–61.

³⁶ Cooper, 'In loco', p. 1.

³⁷ Cooper, 'In loco', p. 33.

³⁸ Cooper, 'In loco', p. 31.

³⁹ Robson, 'The Pilgrim's Progress', p. 51.

⁴⁰ Robson, 'The Pilgrim's Progress', p. 43. On these frescoes see Cannon, 'Dating the Frescoes', pp. 65–69. It should be noted that one of the nave frescoes in the Lower Church, depicting Francis Preaching to the Birds, was repaired and amended in the aftermath of the reconfiguration; see Schwarz, pp. 1–28. On the construction of the chapels on the north side of the nave see Hueck, 'Die Kapellen der Basilika San Francesco in Assisi: die Auftraggeber und die Franziskaner', in Patronage and Public in the Trecento: Proceedings of the St Lambrecht Symposium Abtei St Lambrecht, Styria, 16–19, 1984, ed. Vincent Moletta (Florence, 1986), 81–104.



Fig. 4.9: Magdalen Master, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

Reverence for the Angels

Large-scale images of the Madonna and Child enthroned, with their obvious borrowings from Byzantine icons, had become a commonplace in Italy by Cimabue's time, but at Assisi, Cimabue created an entirely new take on this traditional theme. A brief discussion of other images of the enthroned Madonna made in Italy around the same time underscores the formal and iconographic novelties in Cimabue's Lower Church Madonna. Although frescoed Maestà images were made during this period, most of the surviving examples of monumental Madonnas are on panel, and these include versions by the Magdalen Master, now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin (Fig. 4.9), and Coppo di Marcovaldo, from the church of San Martino dei Servi in Orvieto, both dating from the 1270s (Fig. 4.10). Like the Lower Church Madonna, these feature a seated Virgin enthroned with the Christ Child in her lap, attended by angels. Almost universally, the Madonna is the unquestioned star of these panels. The attendant angels are supporting cast members, relegated to the area behind the Madonna's throne.

In the Gemäldegalerie Madonna attributed to the Magdalen Master, for example, two small angels, barely the height of the Madonna's halo, hover in the sky on either side of her. In the Byzantine icons that inspired these Italian adaptations, the angels are similarly presented, standing like stalwart sentinels behind the Madonna's throne or enclosed within roundels, as in the Kahn Madonna now in the National Gallery in Washington of c. 1250 (Fig. 4.11).⁴¹ In nearly all such surviving examples, the paired angels are not rendered in a way that suggests they inhabit the same space as the Virgin and Child.⁴² In

Cimabue's Madonna at Assisi, instead, the company of angels has grown from two to four, and they are depicted in larger scale, approaching, although not quite equaling, the size of the Madonna herself. The angels are part of the same space as Mary, their fingers touching the arms of the carved wooden throne upon which she sits. Such a presentation also brings the angels into closer contact with the world of the viewer. They gaze not at the Madonna but outward, serving as active interlocutors between the Madonna and those adoring her. Although the Lower Church Madonna's angled throne and the Madonna's pose have analogues in works such

⁴¹ The Kahn Madonna has been the subject of much debate among scholars, some of whom ascribe it to an Italian painter; more recent consensus assigns it to a Byzantine artist. For bibliography on this work see <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.37004.html#bibliography>.

⁴² See the examples compiled in the Garrison, *Italian Romanesque*, pp. 40–49; pp. 79–87. I note here that Garrison's index is now over half a century old, so additional material has come to light, and as Garrison notes, the surviving works only represent a small portion of what was originally produced. Yet

the thirteenth century examples are remarkably consistent in their presentation of the angels in smaller scale. Cimabue was perhaps inspired by the larger scale of the angels seen in earlier Byzantine examples such as the Madonna della Clemenza in Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome, but even in such works the angels do not interact with the viewer or inhabit space in the way seen in the Lower Church Madonna. The closest example I have found to Cimabue's approach is a thirteenth century crusader icon from Saint Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai, see Folda, 'Icon to Altarpiece', pp. 123–45, fig. 6.



Fig. 4.10: Coppo di Marcovaldo, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, Tempera and gold on wood, 238 x 135 cm, San Martino dei Servi, Orvieto.



Fig. 4.11: Byzantine artist, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, Tempera and gold on wood, 124.8 x 70.8 cm, National Gallery, Washington.

as Duccio's Rucellai Madonna of 1285 (Fig. 4.4), no other artist of Cimabue's generation presents angels so prominently. Scholars have noted Cimabue's presentation of the larger-scale, spatially integrated angels here, and it has been considered yet another aspect of the quest for naturalistic pictorial effects that made him famous among Renaissance writers.⁴³

The emphasis on the angels in Cimabue's painting, however, has as much to do with the agenda of the Franciscans at Assisi to promote collective memories of the Order's origins at the Porziuncola. As discussed in the previous chapter, when Francis received his first vision before the talking crucifix at San Damiano, he began a campaign of restoring that building, another church dedicated to Saint Peter, and a church dedicated to Mary:

⁴³ Early studies of Cimabue's work noted the exceptional composition here, see for example Nicolson, *Cimabue*, p. 27, and Stubblebine, 'Byzantine Influence', pp. 96–97.

He came to a place called the Porziuncola where there stood a church of the most Blessed Virgin Mother of God, built in ancient times but now deserted and no one was taking care of it ... he began to stay there regularly in order to repair it, moved by the warm devotion he had toward the Lady of the world. Sensing that angels often visited there, according to the name of that church, which from ancient times was called 'Saint Mary of the Angels', he stayed there out of reverence for the angels and his special love for the mother of Christ.⁴⁴

The former Benedictine foundation of Santa Maria degli Angeli, with its small church, was later given to Francis and his early followers, and was celebrated as the birthplace of the Order. As noted by his biographers, Francis had felt a special attachment to the Porziuncola because of his 'reverence for the angels', since 'angels often visited there' according to local legends. Other early accounts report that even before the Franciscans were given the church for their use, the singing of angels could be heard there. Angels were of great significance in Francis' hagiography; he retreated to Mount LaVerna to fast in honor of Saint Michael the Archangel, and his stigmatization was the product of a vision of an angel—the Seraph.⁴⁵ Bonaventure also linked Francis to the Apocalyptic Angel of the Sixth Seal, a connection commemorated in Cimabue's murals illustrating the Apocalypse in the Upper Church.⁴⁶

At the end of his life, Francis requested to return to Santa Maria degli Angeli to die, and his wish was granted. As Bonaventure relates, 'He asked to be taken to Saint Mary of the Porziuncola so that he might yield up the spirit of life where he had received the spirit of grace'.⁴⁷ It was also at the Porziuncola that Francis' stigmata, which he had kept hidden for the last two years of his life, became revealed to the crowds who came to venerate his body: 'A great number of the citizens of Assisi were admitted to contemplate those sacred marks with their own eyes and to kiss them with their lips'.⁴⁸ The miracle of Francis' stigmata was thus announced and verified at Santa Maria degli Angeli, the cradle of the Order. A vigil was then held the night Francis passed away, and according to Bonaventure 'it seemed to be a vigil of angels, not a wake for the dead'.⁴⁹ It was the presence of angels that distinguished the church dedicated to Mary at the Porziuncola, both in the traditions attached to the site and in Francis' particular relationship to it. One might imagine, then, that Cimabue and the friars at Assisi, wishing to create a monumental Madonna appropriate for the friars to worship before near Francis' tomb, invented a new type of Marian image in which angels are foregrounded visually. Such an image would simultaneously commemorate the Order's foundation and the affirmation of Francis' stigmata at his death. Chiara Frugoni has argued that angels, along with an enthroned image of the Madonna and an image of the adult Christ and Francis, were likewise portrayed in commemoration of the Porziuncola in the so-called 'angels window' in the Upper Church, designed by the Maestro di San Francesco c. 1260.⁵⁰ Through art, the friars were therefore consciously promoting a constructed history of the origins of the Order.

The notion of a conscious association of Cimabue's Madonna with the Porziuncola gains further credence when one considers that many of the earliest followers of Francis who had shared in his first community at Santa Maria degli Angeli were buried in the transepts of the Lower Church, close to the tomb of Francis. Another fourteenth-century addition executed by the workshop of Pietro Lorenzetti around 1320 is the painted lintel just below Cimabue's Madonna, featuring five Franciscans gazing up at her in adoration (Fig. 4.12). These friars are early followers of Francis who are buried just beneath Cimabue's Madonna, their tomb now marked by an iron grate placed over a marble slab decorated with cosmati work. According to friar Ludovico di Pietralunga's

⁴⁴ Bonaventure, *LM*, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 540.

⁴⁸ Bonaventure, *LM*, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 646.

⁴⁵ Bonaventure, *LM*, in FAED, vol. 2, pp. 631–32.

⁴⁹ Bonaventure, *LM*, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 647.

⁴⁶ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, pp. 114–16.

⁵⁰ Frugoni, 'A'ombra', p. 374.

⁴⁷ Bonaventure, *LM*, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 642.



Fig. 4.12: Pietro Lorenzetti, *Five Early Followers of Saint Francis*, Lower Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

c. 1580 account of inscriptions that once identified them, these friars included Brother Bernard of Quintavalle (died c. 1245), the very first follower of Francis, the one who accompanied him to the church of San Nicolò where Francis first read the texts from the bible that shaped the Order's form of life. The second companion of Francis, Brother Sylvester (died 1240), a canon of San Rufino and the first priest to join the Order, is also interred there, along with Brother William of England (died 1232) and a layman from Assisi, Brother Electus (died c. 1253).⁵¹ Two of these, Bernard and Sylvester, were, along with brother Giles, the first three companions to take up residence at the Porziuncola with Francis. Lorenzetti's painted lintel has been dated to c. 1320, and thus by the early fourteenth century at the very latest, Cimabue's Madonna was directly associated with the first members of the Franciscan Order. For the friars in the Sacro Convento, Cimabue's Madonna was 'Santa Maria degli Angeli', a reminder of their Order's birthplace and Francis' ardent love for it.

Pilgrimage and the *Perdono*

Cimabue's Maestà, placed over the tomb of the early followers of Francis, therefore helped to assert that the north transept of the Lower Church was a centre of devotion to the Order's beginnings.

⁵¹ Ludovico di Pietralunga, *Descrizione*, p. 72, misidentified one of the friars, stating that Valentino of Narni is buried there,

although Valentino died in 1378, decades after the Lorenzetti workshop painted the images of the five friars.



Fig. 4.13: Cimabue, *Saint Francis*, Tempera and gold on wood, 123 x 41 cm, Porziuncola Museum, Santa Maria degli Angeli.

⁵² The bodies of the friars buried in the south transept were moved to the crypt in the nineteenth century. See Cooper, 'In loco', p. 2.

The same was true of the south transept, where another group of early followers of Francis was also buried: Leo, Masseo, Rufino and Angelo.⁵² Although no evidence of the thirteenth century decoration of the south transept remains, by the early fourteenth century, the shrines to these early followers of Francis, as we shall see, became important stopping points for pilgrims who came to Assisi not only to visit the shrine of Francis but also to reap the rewards of the *Perdono* indulgence offered at Santa Maria degli Angeli. According to later legends, in 1216 Francis petitioned Pope Honorius III, who was then in Perugia, to give complete and total remission of all sins to pilgrims visiting the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli between August 1 and August 2. Despite this anecdote, the early documentation of the *Perdono* is scarce; it is not mentioned in the biographies of Francis by Bonaventure or Celano.⁵³

Nevertheless, the feast's growing popularity in spite of its 'unofficial' status is attested by the increasingly large numbers of pilgrims coming to Assisi by the late thirteenth century. Those who traveled to Santa Maria degli Angeli were almost certain to be visiting Francis' tomb as well, and indeed the pilgrimage experiences were connected, as Donal Cooper and Janet Robson have shown.⁵⁴ Before receiving pardon for one's sins, a person was expected to do penance, and at the Basilica of Saint Francis, penitent pilgrims heard Mass and received communion prior to visiting the Porziuncola. A stop at Francis' shrine in the Lower Church, and the requisite offerings that went with it, served as spiritual preparation for the *Perdono*. By the middle of the fourteenth century, if not before, the *Perdono* celebrations began with an elaborate procession from the Basilica down to the Porziuncola. Cimabue's Madonna, surrounded by her angels and placed over the tombs of five of Francis' early companions, would therefore remind viewers of the links between the Basilica and the Porziuncola.

The attendant image of Francis, perhaps intended as a focal point for the friars' devotions at Francis' inaccessible tomb, may also have prompted them, as well as pilgrims, to remember the Porziuncola. Scholars have pointed out the affinities between the Lower Church Francis and the painting of the saint now in the Porziuncola Museum at Santa Maria degli Angeli also attributed to Cimabue (Fig. 4.13). Although this

⁵³ On the history of the *Perdono* see Sensi, *Il Perdono*.

⁵⁴ Cooper and Robson, 'Imagery and the Economy', pp. 169–70.

painting's authorship was once called into question, recent studies have affirmed its authorship by Cimabue.⁵⁵ The two paintings of Francis are quite similar in iconography; both show the standing saint in a frontal pose, holding a book and with the side wound of the stigmata prominently displayed via the torn hole in the saint's tunic. In contrast to most of the other images of Francis from this period, Cimabue's Francis in both paintings does not hold a cross. Instead, he holds a closed book with both hands, a subtle iconographic change that aligns him with contemporary images of the Apostles.⁵⁶ Such a presentation would also connote the Porziuncola, for it was there that Francis first created the Order that aspired to be the new Apostolate. The Santa Maria degli Angeli painting, first documented in the eighteenth century, is traditionally believed to be a relic of Francis, painted on a panel of wood from Francis' first coffin, the one in which his body was displayed at the church of San Giorgio from shortly after his death until it was translated to the new basilica.⁵⁷ The fact that Francis' entire body was buried beneath the rock at the Sacro Convento meant that there was a dearth of his relics to be found elsewhere, and thus such paintings supplied needed relics of Francis that pilgrims could see and touch.

If Cimabue was indeed commissioned to paint the image of Francis on the wood from the saint's coffin for Santa Maria degli Angeli, a similar image near his actual tomb would have provided a visual link between the two sacred sites.⁵⁸ And a likewise related depiction of the Virgin might have adorned the Porziuncola, perhaps even on the altar dedicated to her in that church.⁵⁹ The account of the pilgrimage visit of the Franciscan tertiary and mystic Angela of Foligno to Assisi to the *Perdono* in 1290 suggests that pilgrims who processed from the Basilica to Santa Maria degli Angeli were greeted by an image of the Virgin there.⁶⁰ Very early on in the history of the Basilica's decoration, the Order commissioned a single artist to make related devotional panels for both it and Santa Maria degli Angeli. Giunta Pisano painted a cross for the Upper Church in 1236 (now lost), and fashioned a similar, smaller crucifix for Santa Maria degli Angeli (Fig. 4.14).⁶¹ The tradition of connecting the two sites via works of art by the same artist perhaps continued with the Order's patronage of Cimabue's Lower Church Maestà.

Such connections between the Basilica and Santa Maria degli Angeli at the Porziuncola were more important than ever at end of the thirteenth century. The two sites were linked administratively—offerings from the *Perdono* were shared between Santa Maria degli Angeli and the Sacro Convento.⁶² The increasing popularity of the *Perdono* brought larger crowds to the Basilica as well as to Santa Maria degli Angeli. The friars in the Sacro Convento must have been especially motivated to remind visitors to the Basilica that it too was a sacred locus commemorating the foundation of the Order. During the renovation of the north transept, it was crucial to underscore the fact that Francis' first

⁵⁵ Both it and the Lower Church Francis have their antecedents in *vita* icons, such as the aforementioned one now in the Treasury of the Sacro Convento, in which a standing figure of the saint is surrounded by scenes from his life. But around 1260, images of Francis himself, independent of the narrative scenes and, importantly, prominently displaying the side wound of the stigmata, gained popularity. On this painting see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 233–36; Florence 2015, cat. no. 19, p. 202, and Bigaroni, 'La tavola-coperchio', pp. 97–124.

⁵⁶ See Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 233, who notes that Cimabue used the exact same iconography of the standing figure holding a book in his depiction of John the Evangelist in the apse mosaic of Pisa Cathedral.

⁵⁷ Another example of a painting as relic is in the Porziuncola Museum as well, attributed to the Saint Francis Master and painted circa 1260; like Cimabue's version, tradition holds that it was made from the wood from Francis' coffin. See Enrica Neri Lausanna, 'San Francesco tra due angeli', cat. no. 17 in Florence, 2015, p. 198.

⁵⁸ Although there is no medieval documentation connecting the Cimabue panel to Santa Maria degli Angeli, sacred images

of Francis there would surely have existed, and such tangible relics of the saint would certainly have been desired. The reused wood from Francis' coffin might also recall the first site of Francis' shrine at the church of San Giorgio; I am indebted to one of the anonymous peer reviewers of this book for the suggestion.

⁵⁹ Frugoni, *Quale Francesco?*, p. 123. See also the mentions of the altar dedicated to the Virgin in Saint Mary of the Porziuncola in Bonaventure, *LM*, in *FAED*, vol. 2, p. 579; p. 591.

⁶⁰ For the account of Angela's participation in the *Perdono*, see Angela of Foligno, *Il libro*, pp. 486–96, and for the suggestion that Angela saw an image of the Virgin at the Porziuncola (albeit as the author suggests, a sculpted image rather than a painted one) see Lunghi, *La passione*, pp. 19–22. In 1820 the antiquarian Carlo Fea suggested that Cimabue had copied his Lower Church Madonna from an original, older fresco in Santa Maria degli Angeli. See Fea, *Descrizione*, p. 12.

⁶¹ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, pp. 63–72.

⁶² Cooper and Robson, 'Imagery and the Economy', p. 171.

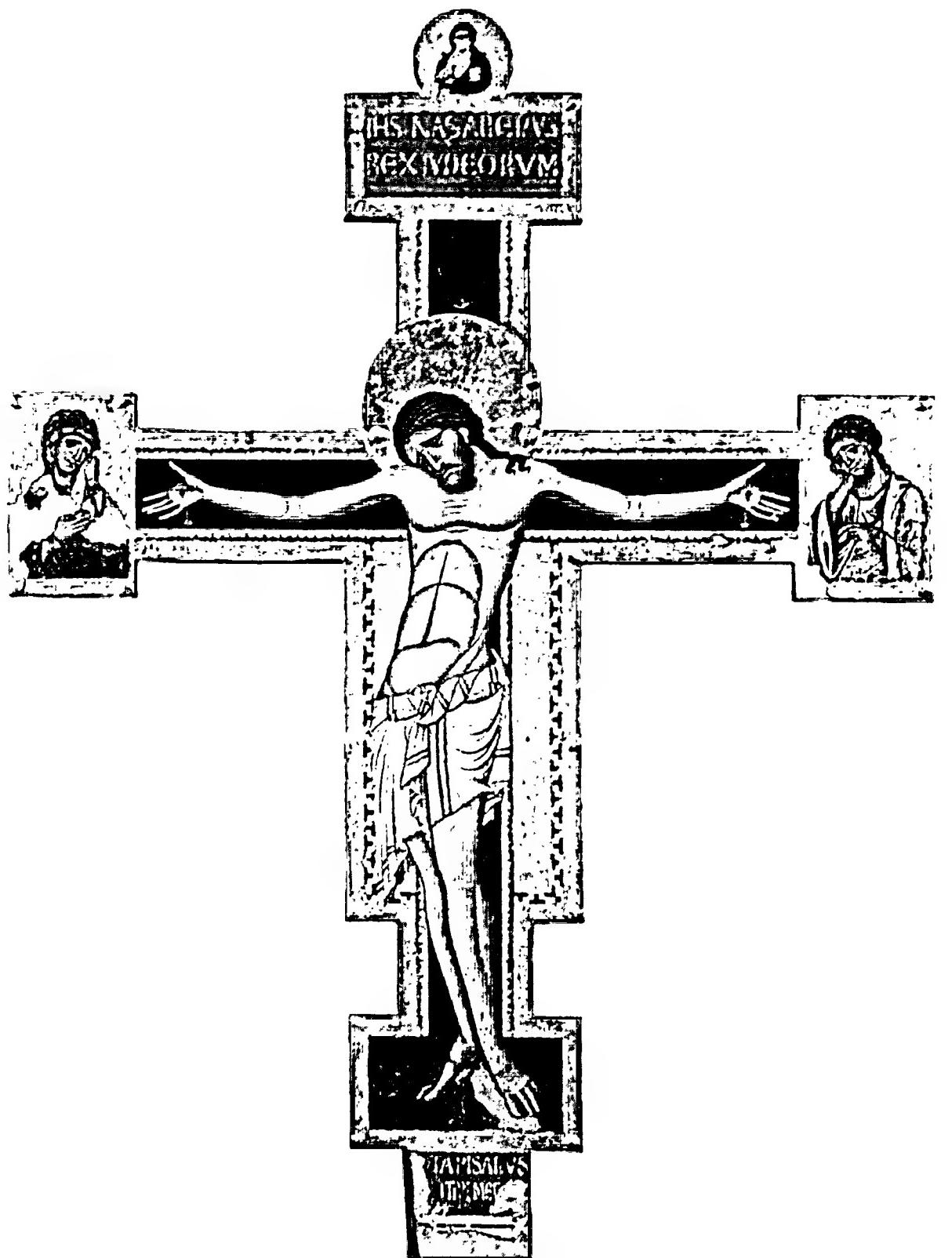


Fig. 4.14: Giunta Pisano, Crucifix, Tempera and gold on wood, 174 x 131 cm, Porziuncola Museum, Santa Maria degli Angeli.

brethren were buried there. When the *tramezzo* was dismantled, slabs of its richly decorated marble were re-used underneath Cimabue's Madonna, drawing attention to the sealed *loculi* of the wall tombs of the friars (Fig. 4.12).⁶³ The addition of the painted lintel featuring the five friars gazing in adoration at Cimabue's Madonna pointed out the presence of Francis' first followers even more explicitly. Pilgrims might find intercession and even healing while venerating the remains of the early friars, as the aforementioned story about Brother William's tomb indicates. Devotees could then model their own actions on that of the friars depicted gazing ardently up at the Madonna, turning their eyes in reverence to her and to Francis.

It is in this context that we may understand why Cimabue's Madonna and Saint Francis were preserved and highlighted during the early fourteenth-century campaign of re-fitting and re-decorating the Lower Church. The new arrangement of side chapels and an open transept offered pilgrims a variety of stopping points within the church on their way to Francis' shrine, including places for them to have their confessions heard and to do penance. Visits to the tombs of the early followers of Francis also served as spiritual preparation as pilgrims approached the final resting place of the founder. Cimabue's Madonna, placed above the tomb of five of Francis' earliest followers, must have already been considered a sacred image, and became an essential stop as pilgrims made their way through the Basilica to Francis' shrine. The fact that it was incorporated within the new programme, and that the portraits of the early friars were added beneath it, attests to its special status. For pilgrims to Assisi, as for these early friars, the image of the Virgin with the adjacent portrait of Francis represented the Order's foundation. She also served as a reminder to pilgrims that the Basilica and the Porziuncola were intimately connected, an increasingly important point as growing factions within the Order began to challenge the authority of the Sacro Convento in the early fourteenth century, claiming that the Porziuncola represented the true way of poverty Francis had espoused.⁶⁴ By presenting and preserving reminders of the Order's beginnings, Cimabue's 'Santa Maria degli Angeli' commemorated Francis' early ideals. It was this desire for remembrance that may also have inspired the Franciscans in other cities to commission similar images from Cimabue.

Cimabue's Pisa Madonna

The Lower Church Madonna at Assisi has often been compared to the panel Cimabue painted for the Franciscan church in Pisa (Fig. 4.2), now in the Louvre.⁶⁵ The painting features the Madonna and Child seated on a throne; the Christ Child raises his right hand in blessing, while the Madonna holds him on her knee. The two sit on a bright red cushion, and Cimabue embellishes the throne with a luxurious cloth of honor in a rich brocade, trimmed with bands featuring pseudo-kufic ornament, in conscious imitation of expensive textiles from Arab lands. As in the Maestà in the Lower Church at Assisi, the throne is depicted as though fashioned from elaborately carved wood, and is obliquely angled to the picture plane. Also similar is the presentation of the angels, who now number six. They are rendered in larger scale than in the typical version of this subject from Cimabue's period, and, as at Assisi, they touch the throne and look out towards the viewer. Again, this iconography ascribes an unusual importance to the angels.

Without documentary evidence, any attempts at a chronology or relative dating for the Assisi fresco and the Pisa panel must be speculative. Thinking about Cimabue's unusual presentation

⁶³ See discussion of the re-used *tramezzo* fragments in Hueck, *Der Lettner*.

⁶⁴ Cooper and Robson, 'Imagery and the Economy' p. 171.

⁶⁵ Along with Giotto's Stigmatization of Saint Francis made for the same church, it was carried off to the Louvre by Napoleon's troops in 1812–13, where it remains today. See Paris 1999–2000, p. 243.

of the angelic Maestà as an emblem of the Order's early days at the Porziuncola, however, allows for new theories as to the sequence in which these works may have been painted. Most scholars consider Cimabue's activity at Assisi, certainly in the Upper Church if not the Lower as well, to have taken place during the pontificate of Nicholas III, between c. 1277–80. Theories of dating for the Pisa Madonna hinge on comparisons of it to the Rucellai Madonna by Duccio, commissioned in 1285 for the Laudesi confraternity, who gathered in the evenings to sing hymns to Mary in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella (Fig. 4.4).⁶⁶ The two Madonnas by Cimabue and Duccio are very close in size, and both feature a throne rendered obliquely to the picture plane, as well as a frame featuring painted roundels with bust-length images of saints and angels.⁶⁷ Among the notable differences between the two paintings is that Duccio does not share Cimabue's interest in rendering the angels in a larger scale. Duccio's six elegant, kneeling angels are smaller, inserted on either side of the throne in a linear fashion, as though pasted onto the composition rather than integrated into it. The question of which painting was executed first and which artist influenced the other remains debatable, although several scholars, including Luciano Bellosi, argued that Cimabue's panel must have been the model for the Rucellai Madonna.⁶⁸ In my view, the Pisa Madonna was most likely executed between Cimabue's Assisi sojourn and the painting of the Rucellai Madonna, roughly between 1280–85. As will be discussed further in the following chapter, Cimabue could have been working for the friars at Santa Croce in Florence at some point in the 1280s; although the chronology remains contentious, a crucifix dated to 1288 by Deodato Orlandi seems indebted to Cimabue's cross.⁶⁹ Cimabue may have returned to Florence after finishing work on the murals at Assisi carried out in the late 1270s, and the strong connections between the friaries in Florence and Pisa may have led to the commission of the Madonna for the Pisan church. In Florence in the mid 1280s, the paths of Duccio and Cimabue may have crossed, leading to the compositional similarities of the Rucellai and Pisa Madonnas.

Another reason that the Pisa Maestà may have been painted after the one in the Lower Church is that the Franciscans in Tuscany had strong ties to Assisi, and there is evidence that the Pisans in particular modeled their artistic commissions on the Assisi Basilica. Archbishop Federico Visconti, when he laid the foundation stone for a new church for the Franciscans in 1260, proclaimed that the building should be spacious and distinguished like that of Assisi.⁷⁰ Suggestive of the Pisan friars' ambitions is the fact that San Francesco in Pisa was the first of the large Tuscan churches built by the Order, and at eighty meters long, it would certainly have met the archbishop's criteria for size.⁷¹ The friars in Pisa had also chosen an artist who worked at Assisi, Giunta Pisano, to paint a *vita* panel depicting Francis and six of his posthumous miracles (Fig. 4.15).⁷² Later, at the close of the thirteenth century, the friars in Pisa ordered a panel from Giotto depicting the Stigmatization of Saint Francis that also features three additional scenes from Francis' *vita* (Fig. 4.17). The iconography of all of the scenes on Giotto's panel is based on that of the corresponding scenes in the Upper Church at Assisi.⁷³ Although Giotto's potential involvement in the Upper Church cycle is still a matter of scholarly debate, the fact that the friars in Pisa selected him for such a commission, and that he

⁶⁶ On the Rucellai Madonna see Bellosi, 'The Function', pp. 146–59; Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 83–86.

⁶⁷ On the frame of Cimabue's panel, at the top is a blessing Christ (restored) and four angels, with four evangelists at the corners and twelve apostles on sides, on bottom saints Francis, Clare, and three other saints, including possibly Elizabeth of Hungary.

⁶⁸ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 114.

⁶⁹ For discussion of the date of the Santa Croce Crucifix see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 101 and pp. 273–74. See also de Marchi, 'Cum dictum opus', p. 611.

⁷⁰ This church replaced an earlier Franciscan foundation in

the city. See Ronzani, 'Il Francescanesimo', p. 32. It should also be noted that the Pisans kept their own calendar until 1406, which was roughly a year ahead of the Gregorian calendar. I give the dates here according to the Gregorian calendar.

⁷¹ An architectural history of the church is lacking, but see the brief introduction in Banti, *La Chiesa di San Francesco*, and the discussions of the church in Gustafson, *Tradition and Renewal*. On the history of the Franciscans in Pisa see Ronzani, 'Il Francescanesimo', pp. 1–55.

⁷² On this panel see Pisa, pp. 122–25, and Florence, pp. 180–81.

⁷³ Cooper, 'Redefining the Altarpiece', p. 692.



Fig. 4.15: Attributed to Giunta Pisano, *Saint Francis Vita Panel*, Tempera and gold on wood, 155 x 132.5 cm, Museo di San Matteo, Pisa.

replicated scenes from the Assisi frescoes, hints that they wished to forge visual links between their convent and the Basilica at Assisi. In tapping Cimabue for their Marian panel, and then Giotto for the Stigmatization panel, the friars in Pisa seem to have repeatedly hired artists known for their works at Assisi and commissioned related images from them.

It is also significant that both of the large panels by Cimabue and Giotto feature iconographic references to the Order's foundation. As argued above, Cimabue's rendering of a 'Santa Maria degli Angeli' recalls the Order's beginnings. So do two of the three episodes from Francis' *vita* shown in the lower portion of Giotto's painting: The Dream of Innocent III and The Approval of the Franciscan Rule. The third scene included, Francis Preaching to the Birds, although detailed in one of the later chapters of Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, also relates to origins in that it commemorates the Order's first missionary endeavors. The miracle of the preaching to the birds occurs just after Francis prayed that God might reveal to him whether he should spend his time in prayer or preaching. The Order's commitment to the *vita mixta* of preaching and contemplation thus becomes confirmed as Francis commands the birds' attention with his sermon.⁷⁴ The Pisan Franciscans' appropriation of images that celebrate the Order's foundation and simultaneously recall works of art in the motherhouse at Assisi, also painted by the same artists who originated such images, strengthened the prestige of the Pisan convent while also asserting the Order's identity for wider audiences.⁷⁵

Who were the audiences for the monumental painted panels in San Francesco in Pisa? Where was Cimabue's Pisa Maestà originally located, and who could see it? Recent scholarship has offered different theories as to the placement of such large-scale painted panels within churches in the late thirteenth century. For many years, monumental panels, including Cimabue's Pisa Madonna, were thought to be meant for the high altar of a church.⁷⁶ Giorgio Vasari, in fact, states that Cimabue's massive panel once adorned the high altar of San Francesco in Pisa.⁷⁷ As demonstrated by Joanna Cannon's research, however, altarpieces were not standard features on the high altars of mendicant churches in the duecento.⁷⁸ If indeed Cimabue's painting was once located on the high altar in San Francesco, it was moved before the middle of the fourteenth century, when the Gambacorta family commissioned the sculpted altarpiece by Tommaso Pisano that remains in situ today.⁷⁹ Another potential site for the Cimabue Madonna is the chapel just to the left of the high altar, which was dedicated to the Virgin from at least the middle of the fourteenth century, if not earlier.⁸⁰

Recent scholarship, however, suggests that large panels like these were not always placed on high altars or even on altars at all. Monumental Marian paintings, or what Victor Schmidt has termed 'super icons', often seem to have been situated elsewhere.⁸¹ The Rucellai Madonna, for example, commissioned by a lay confraternity that gathered to sing praise to the Virgin in front of it, was surely located outside of the *ecclesia fratrum* in Santa Maria Novella, in an area more accessible to the laity. Hans Belting proposed that such images were commissioned by confraternities, and meant for side altars.⁸² Others have suggested that the Rucellai Madonna was placed high on a pillar between two chapels within Santa Maria Novella.⁸³ Joanna Cannon suggested that the Rucellai Madonna was intended for the intermediary screen of the church, either on the top or on the wall facing the *ecclesia laicorum*.⁸⁴ Most recently, Andrea de Marchi has presented important new evidence that the early murals in the Saint Gregory chapel were intended to frame the

Rucellai Madonna, and that this was a provisional arrangement for the painting while the nave was being completed.⁸⁵ In any case, the Rucellai Madonna must have been intended for viewing by multiple audiences.

Bram Kempers, Irene Hueck and others have suggested that *tramezzi* were likely sites for the placement of large painted panels.⁸⁶ Andrea De Marchi has established that churches in the period often featured trios of paintings placed atop beams dividing the nave, much as is indicated in the fresco depicting the Verification of the Stigmata painted in the nave of the Upper Church at Assisi c. 1290–97 (Fig. 4.16).⁸⁷ As shown in the fresco and in several of the reconstructions offered by De Marchi, these arrangements typically included a cross in the centre with two other panels flanking it. In the Assisi fresco, an image of the Virgin and Child enthroned is positioned atop the beam at left, and all three paintings are canted forward, in order to increase their visibility from below. A trio of paintings was probably dispositioned like this in San Francesco in Pisa. Expanding upon a proposal originally made by Kempers, Donal Cooper argues convincingly that Giotto's Stigmatization of Saint Francis (Fig. 4.17) graced the screen that once divided the nave of the church.⁸⁸

What about Cimabue's Pisa Maestà? Did it too adorn the *tramezzo* alongside Giotto's *Stigmatization* and a crucifix, as Andrea De Marchi has suggested?⁸⁹ The Pisa Madonna's grand scale casts some doubt on this theory. It is massive, measuring 427 × 280 centimeters or 168.1 inches × 110.2 inches (14 feet × 9 feet 2 inches). Giotto's *Stigmatization* is considerably smaller, measuring 313.5 × 162.5 centimeters (10.3 feet × 5.3 feet), so if Cimabue's Madonna was part of the same trio atop a screen, the presentation would have been rather unbalanced visually. Yet, because the panels were not commissioned at the same time, such a discrepancy was perhaps not an issue. As Cooper has noted, a seventeenth-century description of San Francesco mentions that at that time the Maestà had been installed 'in alto' over the sacristy door, perhaps in replication of an earlier installation of the panel placed up high within the church, as it would have been on the top of a screen.⁹⁰ It is also possible,



Fig. 4.16: St. Francis Master or Giotto, *Verification of the Stigmata*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

⁷⁴ Bonaventure, *LM* 12:3, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 624.

⁷⁵ On similar notions of the Order's establishment of corporate identities via visual ties to Assisi, see Bourdieu, *The Franciscans*, pp. 148–55.

⁷⁶ Hager, *Die Anfänge*, pp. 130–54.

⁷⁷ Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. Milanesi, I pp. 251, states that Cimabue's San Francesco Madonna 'dopo non molto tempo' was taken down and replaced by T'altare di marmo che vi e' presente'.

⁷⁸ Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, p. 72.

⁷⁹ The marble altarpiece was crafted in 1360s; on it see Buresi, ed. p. 191, no. 47.

⁸⁰ Cooper, 'Redefining the Altarpiece', p. 701.

⁸¹ Schmidt, 'Religious Panel Paintings', pp. 79–91.

⁸² Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 384–98.

⁸³ Bent, *Public Painting*, pp. 66–68.

⁸⁴ Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, p. 86.

⁸⁵ De Marchi suggests that this was a provisional arrangement while the nave was being finished. See De Marchi, 'Duccio e Giotto', pp. 134–46.

⁸⁶ Kempers, *Painting, Power*, pp. 44–51. For the proposal that Giotto's Ognissanti Madonna was placed on the *tramezzo* of that church, see Hueck, 'Le opere di Giotto', pp. 37–50.

⁸⁷ De Marchi, 'Cum dictum', pp. 603–21. See also Coor-Achenbach, 'A visual basis', pp. 233–47.

⁸⁸ Cooper, 'Redefining the Altarpiece', pp. 700–04.

⁸⁹ De Marchi, 'Cum dictum', p. 608.

⁹⁰ See Nuti, *Descrizione*: 'Sopra la porta della sagrestia dalla parte che corrisponde in chiesa e' una tavola antica, lavorata alla maniera Greca di Cimabue'. Nuti also says that the high altar did not have anything on it: 'La cappella maggiore fun el suo principio senza ornamenti'. Cited in Cooper, 'Redefining the Altarpiece', note 54.



Fig. 4.17: Giotto, *Stigmatization of Saint Francis*, Tempera and gold on wood, 313 x 163 cm, Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 4.18: Giotto, *Ognissanti Madonna*, Tempera and gold on wood, 325 x 205 cm, Uffizi, Florence.

however, that Cimabue's panel was placed on the *tramezzo* in a different way; it could have stood on an altar against the outside wall of the choir screen, facing the lay congregation. Such a scenario might have resembled that proposed by Hueck for Giotto's Ognissanti Madonna (Fig. 4.18).⁹¹ A very high *tramezzo* wall would have been required to accommodate Cimabue's enormous panel, however, which stands over fourteen feet high. Unfortunately, very little information survives regarding the size and format of the screen in San Francesco in Pisa, but one must have existed.⁹² A document dated 1483, published by Donal Cooper, mentions an altar dedicated to Mary located outside the choir near the pulpit of the church, a reference hinting at the presence of a screen.⁹³ Further evidence is needed to settle the question of the Pisa Maestà's original location definitively, but like Cimabue's Madonna at Assisi, the panel would probably have been seen both by friars and lay viewers, who would have viewed it at least occasionally if it were within the friars' church. The Pisa Madonna's references to the Order's beginnings would have been meaningful to both audiences, commemorating the Virgin's and her angels' personal connection to the Franciscans.

⁹¹ See Hueck, 'Le opere'. The recent study of the Humiliati in Florence by Miller and Taylor-Mitchell, however, following a suggestion made by Weppelman, argues that Giotto's painting was meant for the high altar. See Miller and Taylor-Mitchell, *From Giotto to Botticelli*, p. 31.

⁹² On the liturgical arrangement of Franciscan churches see Cooper, *In medio ecclesiae*, pp. 41–71. Any screen that existed in San Francesco in Pisa no longer existed by the 1520s. See Cooper, 'Redefining the Altarpiece', p. 704.

⁹³ See Cooper, 'Redefining the Altarpiece', note 118.

Another iconographic detail shared by the Pisa Maestà and Cimabue's Lower Church Madonna at Assisi offers a clue as to the way audiences interacted with both paintings: the unusual way the angel closest to the viewer at his/her right gestures with a hand towards the Virgin's left foot (Figs 4.1 and 4.2). Joanna Cannon has noted that in the Assisi Madonna, the gesture of the angel seems to point to the Virgin's foot, instructing the viewer to kiss it, perhaps imaginatively rather than literally, as an act of *adoratio* or supplication.⁹⁴ Pointing to evidence for the ritual kissing of the pope's red slipper, Cannon notes that the Madonna in the painting at Assisi wears a red shoe, a nod perhaps to the rituals that took place at the church, a papal chapel.⁹⁵ A kindred prominence of the Virgin's foot can be seen in other large panels, such as Duccio's Rucellai Madonna, where her similarly shod foot protrudes from the front of the throne (Fig. 4.4). However, Cimabue's versions in Assisi and Pisa are more explicit; the angel directs the viewer's attention to the foot by the hand gesture and the outward gaze that draws the viewer in. An indication that the Pisa Madonna represents a later version of the Santa Maria degli Angeli at Assisi is the adjustment that Cimabue makes to this angel in the Pisa Madonna, where the angel no longer grasps the throne with a partially open right hand. Instead, the same hand has been moved forward in front of the throne, so that it now directs the eye more explicitly to the Virgin's left foot, clad in a pointy-toed, black slipper. The gesture in the Pisa Madonna is thus more legible, allowing the large panel to effectively invite worshippers to venerate her and indeed offering them explicit instructions as to how to do so. Lay audiences in particular would need such guidance; if the miraculous story of the sheep at the Porziuncola who set an example for genuflection before Mary is any indication, proper comportment before holy figures (and their images) was crucial. The more obvious presentation of the opportunity for *adoratio* in the Pisa panel therefore suggests its viewing by a lay public. Whether placed on an altar or on a choir screen, Cimabue's Pisa Maestà would have simultaneously recalled the early days of the Franciscan Order and inspired reverent devotion to Mary.

The Legacy of Cimabue's Franciscan Maestà

The Pisa Maestà's iconographic similarities to Cimabue's Lower Church Madonna at Assisi, particularly the emphasis on the angels, tie it also to Santa Maria degli Angeli. In what follows, I will discuss additional aspects of the Pisa Maestà, seen also in the Assisi Madonna, that contribute to the Franciscan meaning of these works and distinguish them from other Marian images. I propose that Cimabue sought to create a 'signature' monumental Madonna, one whose iconography relates specifically to the Franciscans and would be recognized as emblematic of the Order's interests. As mentioned above, in the late thirteenth century, large painted images of the Madonna and Child enthroned were not a novelty; many religious orders and lay confraternities commissioned them. What has not been noted, however, is how Cimabue's monumental Madonnas demonstrate efforts on the part of the Franciscan Order to create innovative images that asserted their corporate identity. The Franciscans were not the only religious order to do so. A comparison of large Marian panels that Cimabue painted for the Servites, the Vallombrosians, and the Franciscans, evinces how seemingly standard iconography could be mobilized to serve different ideologies. In the case of Cimabue and the Franciscans, the Santa Maria degli Angeli type that Cimabue presented first at Assisi becomes replicated and adapted in Pisa, as we have seen, and also in smaller painted panels used for personal devotion.

Besides the emphasis on the angels, two details shared by both the Assisi and Pisa Maestà paintings point to Franciscan religious ideologies. One is the way that the Virgin's left hand draws

⁹⁴ Cannon, 'Kissing the Virgin's Foot', p. 18.

⁹⁵ Cannon, 'Kissing the Virgin's Foot', pp. 1–50; Cannon, 'Duccio and Devotion', pp. 39–61.



Fig. 4.19: Unknown artist, *Icon of Virgin and Child (The Virgin of Tenderness)*, Mosaic, 107 x 73.5 cm, Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens.

attention to the clothing of the Christ Child. In both versions of the Maestà, the Christ Child is seated on the Virgin's left thigh, and her left arm cradles his left leg. Her left hand grasps the garments he is wearing, which are further emphasized by the way she holds his clothing between her forefinger and her middle finger, as is most clearly seen in the Pisa Madonna (Fig. 4.2). This means of holding him and his garments is rather unnatural, and indeed awkward. It must be a purposeful means of drawing attention to his clothing. As will be discussed further in the following chapter, the clothing of Christ was a leitmotif in Franciscan literature and art. This interest is connected, as is that in the Porziuncola, to the biography of Francis. The son of a cloth merchant, Francis stripped publically as an act of renouncing his father's wealth and embracing a life of holy poverty. As part of efforts to connect Francis to Christ, Franciscan devotional texts such as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* similarly emphasize the dressing and stripping of Christ.⁹⁶ The focus on Christ's clothing also promotes Marian piety, for she provided his clothing in both a metaphorical and literal sense. As his mother, she gave him the flesh that 'clothed' God's human form as Christ; thus Francis calls her 'robe' in the litany he composed to her.⁹⁷ In the *Meditationes* and other apocryphal accounts, she sewed a seamless tunic for him that grew miraculously as he did, and used her veil to swaddle him and later to provide his loincloth.⁹⁸

The sacred kinship between Mary and Christ is reinforced visually in the Pisa and Assisi Madonnas, for in both she directs the viewer's attention to his clothing. Cimabue's accentuation of dress in his Franciscan Maestà images has important antecedents in Byzantine icons, such as that in an icon of the late twelfth century now in the Byzantine Museum in Athens (Fig. 4.19), where Mary holds the robe of the Christ child between her fingers.⁹⁹ Cimabue may have also known the large Marian panels made by his fellow Florentine Coppo di Marcovaldo for the Servites and Dominicans in Siena, as well as the Franciscans in Siena and Arezzo. In these renditions, the Virgin holds the child on a yellow or white cloth, as in Coppo's *Madonna del Bordone* (Fig. 4.20). These textiles resemble those seen in images of the lamenting Virgin holding a cloth to her face, as in the left terminal of Cimabue's Arezzo crucifix (Fig. 4.21). Several scholars have pointed out how cloths like this were used as Eucharistic veils or as maniples held by priests; the motif thus recalled both Christ's Passion and Mary's suffering.¹⁰⁰ In Cimabue's versions at Assisi and Pisa, however, the

96 On this motif see Flora, 'Fashioning the Passion'.

97 Francis of Assisi, *A Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, in FAED, vol. 1, p. 163.

98 Flora, 'Fashioning the Passion'.

99 See Pisa, cat. no. 17, p. 132.

100 See Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 52, and also Corrie, 'Coppo di Marcovaldo's *Madonna del Bordone*', pp. 48–49, where she also points out the similarities of these textiles to those in Lamentation scenes.



Fig. 4.20: Coppo di Marcovaldo, *Madonna and Child*, Tempera and gold on wood, 225 x 125 cm, Santa Maria dei Servi, Siena.



Fig. 4.21: Cimabue, Crucifix (Detail), Tempera and gold on wood, 336 x 267 cm, Santa Domenico, Arezzo.

cloth under the Christ child is abandoned, and the Virgin clearly points to the Christ Child's own dress. Another departure from tradition Cimabue makes is in the position of the Madonna's right hand. In many earlier examples of Maestà iconography, the Virgin gestures to the child with her right hand, a pose adapted from Byzantine 'Hodegetria' icons.¹⁰¹ At Assisi, instead, the right hand of the Virgin curls around the left foot of the Christ child, alluding to the fact that the early friars forwent footwear in their extreme observance of poverty (Fig. 4.1). This detail connects him to the adjacent image of Francis, who is also barefoot. At Pisa, instead, the right hand of the Madonna rests on the knee of the child, further directing the viewer's gaze to his clothing. In either instance,

¹⁰¹ For a recent discussion of this iconography and its adaptation in the west, see Folda, *Byzantine Art*.

the special attention paid to the dress or to the bare feet of the child could prompt devotion to the Christ-like, shoeless Francis.

Another aspect of Cimabue's signature Franciscan Madonna type is the depiction of an obliquely angled wooden throne.¹⁰² Again Cimabue departs from many previous examples such as the panels by Coppo that present the throne frontally; one notable exception is the panel attributed to the Maestro di San Martino, now in the Museo di San Matteo in Pisa (Fig. 4.22), which features an diagonally positioned throne. But the thrones painted by other artists are by and large more elaborate than those Cimabue painted at Assisi and Pisa. Even though Coppo's Madonna del Bordone made for the Servites in Siena features a throne that is partly constructed of wood, it is also painted as though inlaid with pearls at its base and supported by polychromed and gilded pillars decorated with acanthus leaves (Fig. 4.19). Duccio's Rucellai Madonna likewise sits on a dazzling seat, in this case the throne is wooden but intricately gilded and polychromed (Fig. 4.4). Cimabue's thrones at Assisi and Pisa, conversely, are made of wood but lack additional adornments. Similar thrones appear also in Cimabue's Upper Church Murals, as in Evangelists' vault. The relative simplicity of the bare wood of this type of throne could be a nod to Franciscan poverty and humility. Julia Miller and Laurie Taylor-Mitchell recently argued that the wooden platform depicted under the Virgin's feet in Giotto's Ognissanti Madonna alludes to the virtue of humility espoused by the eponymous Humiliati Order who commissioned it (Fig. 4.18).¹⁰³

However, like Giotto's throne, seemingly fashioned from coloured marble, Cimabue's thrones mix references to luxury with nods to poverty. The thrones at Assisi and Pisa are draped with sumptuous textiles connoting the luxury typically shown in other examples, and such an intricately carved wooden throne would surely also have been costly. And of course the Madonna herself is completely surrounded by the gleaming gold background on the Pisa panel and the expensive blue azurite pigments used in the Assisi fresco. The lack of coloured embellishments on the Assisi and Pisa thrones, however, calls attention specifically to the raw material, that is to the wood of the throne itself. The material of the throne invoked Christ's cross, and Francis was ardently devoted to the cross, as will be explained in greater detail in the following chapter. In Franciscan exegesis, the source of the wood of the cross—a tree—was also a metaphor for Mary herself. Verses of a thirteenth-century anonymous Franciscan hymn make this connection explicit: 'Here is the child-bearing Virgin / Here is the healing Cross / Both are the mystical trees'.¹⁰⁴ Cimabue's depiction of the wooden throne in Franciscan contexts thus underlines the close link between Mary and her son.

Further, Cimabue's choice of a light brown, honey coloured wood, in contrast to, for example, the Maestro di San Martino's deep brown throne, may reflect Francis' description of Mary in one of his hymns of praise to her as 'tabernacle'. In describing her thus, he alludes to the Ark of Covenant, the container the Israelites constructed to house the tablets of the Law given to Moses in Exodus 25. As the physical house of the incarnate God, Mary is the Ark, the container of the Holy of Holies. This typology fits well not only with Marian and Christological emphases, but also with Franciscan tropes of the period that promoted Francis as a new Moses.¹⁰⁵ Bonaventure invoked the metaphor of the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* as he outlined a mystical progression of a devotee into the close experience of God. He described how one can move from contemplating God in his vestiges in the world, that is through physical things including objects and images, to a stage where God can be seen in the 'mind itself'. At this stage in the meditative ascent, one 'should try to see God through a mirror, as it were, in the holy place, namely in the area in front of the tabernacle'.¹⁰⁶ The biblical account describes the tabernacle and ark as made from acacia wood, a light, honey toned wood that was then gilded. Although shown without gilding, Cimabue's thrones are painted as though fashioned from a similar type of wood.

Other Franciscan works of the period feature a likewise pale wooden throne, further evidence that the wooden throne was a Franciscan symbol. An example is a panel once attributed to Cimabue, but now given to the Maestro della Cappella Velluti, in the Contini Bonacossi collection, currently



Fig. 4.22: Master of Saint Martino, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Scenes from the Lives of Joachim and Anne*, Tempera and gold on wood, 162 x 125 cm, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa.

housed in the Uffizi (Fig. 4.23). The artist portrays an oblique wooden throne, and the Virgin's gestures towards the Christ child's clothing that recall those in the Assisi and Pisa Madonnas. In place of prominent angels are saints Francis and Dominic; Franciscan patronage being suggested by the placement of Francis at the right, favored side of the Virgin. Smaller panels commissioned by the Franciscans at this moment also feature the oblique wooden throne. One is Duccio's exquisite small panel, the *Madonna of the Franciscans*, now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena (Fig. 4.24). Victor Schmidt proposed that this panel was based on Cimabue's Lower Church *Madonna*, with the addition of the three kneeling friars hovering under the protection of the Virgin's mantle.¹⁰⁷ Cimabue's small panel of the Virgin and Child now in the National Gallery in London, to be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6, also features the same diagonally oriented throne made of wood (Fig. 4.25). As Schmidt suggested, these small panels for personal devotion at times replicated larger public images deliberately, allowing a devout patron to connect his or her experiences in a church to religious rituals performed at home. In both the large and small panels, the consistent repetition of the diagonal wooden throne in Franciscan contexts suggests that it is a hallmark of decidedly Franciscan Maestà, one that ultimately harks back to Cimabue's Lower Church *Madonna* at Assisi.

Two other large-scale Madonnas Cimabue painted for other religious orders provide telling comparisons and contrasts with those he created for the Franciscans. At an unknown date, perhaps around 1290, Cimabue fashioned a Maestà for the church of Santa Maria dei Servi in Bologna (Fig. 4.26). Here, Cimabue portrays an obliquely-angled, wooden throne, but one that is distinguished from that he painted at

¹⁰² Cimabue's depictions of this type of throne are discussed in terms of the notion of perspectival development in Stubblebine, 'The Development', pp. 32–39.

¹⁰³ Miller and Laurie Taylor-Mitchell, *From Giotto to Botticelli*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁴ 'Hic virgo puerpera / Hic crux salutifera / Ambo ligna mistica', See translation and transcription in Ransom, 'The Eyes Have It', p. 193.

¹⁰⁵ On the typology of Francis and Moses see Fleming, *From Bonaventure*, p. 64; Clasen, 'Franziskus', pp. 200–08. Ratzinger, 'The Theology', p. 180 n. 36, conversely, asserts that the Moses/Francis connection in Bonaventure's writings is minimal.

¹⁰⁶ The tabernacle is invoked again as a metaphor one additional time in the same text. See Bonaventure, *Itinerarium* 3:1 and 5:1, ed. Boehner and Hayes, p. 81 and p. 111.

¹⁰⁷ Schmidt, 'Madonna dei Francescani', pp. 38–39.



Fig. 4.23: Cimabue, *Madonna Enthroned with Saints Francis and Dominic*, Tempera and gold on panel, 133 x 81 cm, Uffizi, Florence (Formerly Contini Bonacossi Collection).



Fig. 4.24: Duccio, *Madonna of the Franciscans*, Tempera and gold on wood, 23.5 x 16 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

made for the Servites in Bologna, Cimabue retains the lyre-backed throne, although he turns the lower portion on a diagonal, recalling the thrones in his Assisi and Pisa paintings. The bare legs of the Christ Child are also emphasized, but Cimabue puts a new spin on this motif by presenting the Child in an upright posture, striding forward on his mother's lap. The child's ankle length tunic splits open to reveal his bare leg, highlighting it even more than in Coppo's version, where the child sits placidly on his mother's lap. Thus Cimabue creates an updated version of the Servite Madonna that acknowledges that Order's devotional interests.

The Marian images that Cimabue made for the Servites and the Franciscans suggests that those orders trusted him to create works that were at once inventive and mindful of the heritage of their orders. It was perhaps the reputation Cimabue had established with these Madonna panels that led the Vallombrosans, a reformed Benedictine monastic order founded near Florence in the eleventh century, to choose Cimabue to paint a Maestà for their Florentine church of Santa Trinita (Fig. 4.27).¹¹⁰ Because so little is known about the architecture and furnishings of the church of Santa Trinita in the thirteenth century, few theories as to its original position have been proposed. Although Vasari claimed it originally adorned the high altar of the church, fourteenth-century documents noting a wooden cross over the high altar counter that notion.¹¹¹ Drawing comparisons

¹⁰⁸ Mina, 'Coppo di Marcovaldo's *Madonna del Bordone*', pp. 237–93.

¹⁰⁹ Corrie also discusses the importance of the *Madonna del Bordone* for Siena in the wake of the victory of Siena over the Florentines at the battle of Montaperti in 1261, see Corrie, 'The Political Meaning', pp. 63–65.

Assisi and Pisa by the dramatic curves on its back. This is a 'lyre' backed throne similar to that seen in Byzantine icons and appropriated by Coppo di Marcovaldo in his *Madonna del Bordone* painted for the Servites in Siena in 1261 (Fig. 4.19). It is to Coppo's pioneering image that we must look to understand Cimabue's version of a specifically Servite Madonna. The Servites, or 'Servants of Mary', were an order of regular clergy, founded by a group of Florentine laymen in the 1230s. Coppo's painting seems to have been commissioned by members of that order, who gathered to sing antiphons in praise of Mary in front of it.¹⁰⁸ Rebecca Corrie convincingly argued that Coppo's adaptation of the lyre-shaped throne relates to the especial Servite devotion to her as the *Regina Coeli* or Queen of Heaven.¹⁰⁹ A similar throne appears in a similar panel Coppo painted for the Servites in Orvieto. Additionally, Corrie has shown that in Siena, Coppo adapted the motif of the barelegged Christ Child from Byzantine sources as a reference to the episode of the Presentation in the Temple. At the Presentation, the priest Simeon and the prophetess Anna foretell the eventual sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and thus the narrative points towards the Crucifixion as well as the Eucharist. In images of that event from Byzantium, the Christ Child wears a short tunic showing his legs; Coppo's presentation of the child's bare legs would remind viewers of Christ's future death. In his Maestà



Fig. 4.25: Cimabue, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, Tempera and gold on wood, 25.6 x 20.8 cm, National Gallery, London.

with Duccio's Rucellai Madonna, George R. Bent recently suggested that the Santa Trinita Maestà was commissioned for a confraternity, such as the Santa Maria delle Laude that gathered in the church, documented before the year 1300.¹¹²

Equally uncertain is the panel's date. Some scholars note its stylistic similarities to the murals at Assisi, while others point to the massive, frontal throne as a perspectival experiment and thus evidence that this is a late work of Cimabue's. Eugenio Battisti suggested a possible patron for the work: Valentino II degli Abati, the abbot general of the Vallombrosans, who was an advisor to the pope Nicholas III and his delegate in Florence. Cimabue's Upper Church murals were painted

¹¹⁰ Bent, *Public Painting*, p. 69; On the confraternity see Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, p. 465.

¹¹¹ de Benedictis, 'La pittura del duecento', p. 91.



Fig. 4.26: Cimabue, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, Tempera and gold on wood, 218 x 118 cm, Santa Maria dei Servi, Bologna.

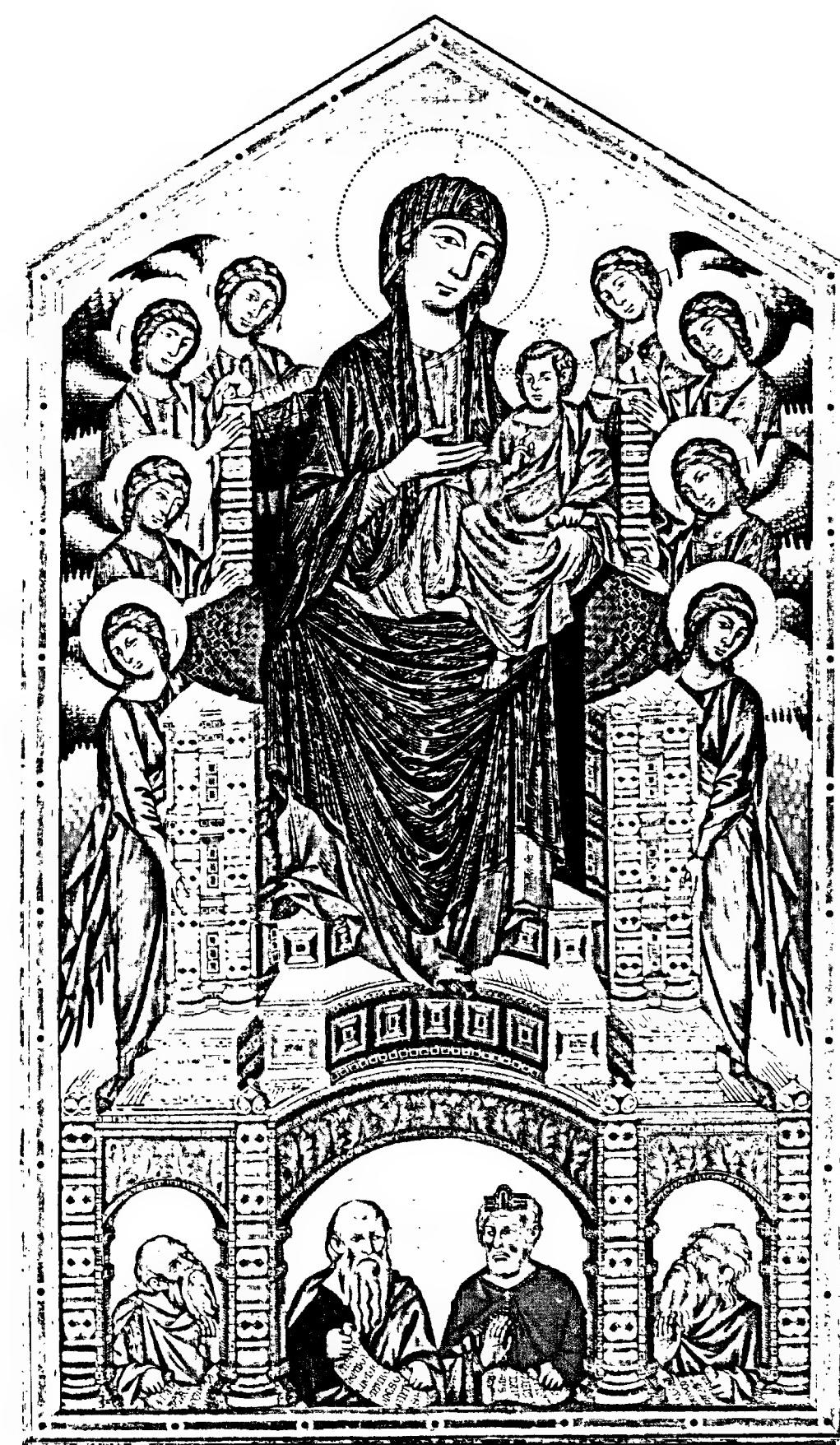


Fig. 4.27: Cimabue, *Virgin and Child in Majesty*, Tempera and gold on wood, 385 x 223 cm, Uffizi, Florence.

circa 1277–80 during the pontificate of Nicholas III, and thus Cristina de Benedictis, following a suggestion by Battisti, speculates that if indeed the Santa Trinità Madonna is an earlier work by Cimabue, this papal connection could have prompted the Franciscans at Assisi to hire him.¹¹³ The situation could also have worked in the opposite direction, with Cimabue's work at Assisi prompting his employment by the Vallombrosans in his native city.

As noted above, there are stylistic commonalities between the Assisi murals and the Santa Trinità Maestà, which features a massive throne that like that at Pisa and Assisi is made of lathed wood. At Santa Trinità, however, the throne is even more monumental and elaborate, gilded and painted as though inlaid with small bits of coloured tesserae. As at Pisa and Assisi, the eight angels surrounding Mary and the child are rendered in larger scale than in many other contemporary Marian images, but here they are pushed back within the composition. Thus Cimabue makes way for the most striking and novel element, and that closest to the viewer: the so-called 'proto-predella' at the bottom of the panel, showing four bust length Old Testament figures presented with haloes and enclosed within the arches of the base of the throne. The figures are Jeremiah, Abraham, David and Isaiah, identified by the scrolls they hold displaying biblical texts associated with each of them. Jeremiah and Isaiah prophesized the coming of the Messiah via a virgin, and Abraham and David are genealogical and typological precursors to Mary, ideas that are reinforced by the biblical excerpts each figure holds.¹¹⁴ Isaiah and Jeremiah look upwards towards the Virgin, and each holds an open palm towards the viewer. David gestures similarly, looking towards Abraham, who holds his scroll with both hands and gazes obliquely outward from the picture plane. The inclusion of these four men at the base of Mary's throne effectively glorifies the prophetic heritage and Old Testament genealogy of Mary and her Child.

Because of the general reverence for Mary evinced here, applicable to many religious groups in the period, no scholar has previously connected the iconography of this panel specifically to the Vallombrosans.¹¹⁵ A case can be made, however, for the specific relevance of the most innovative element of the panel—the four Old Testament figures—to them. As a reformed Benedictine congregation, the Vallombrosans looked back to the early writings of that Order as they espoused communal living combined with extreme asceticism. Images of Giovanni Gualberto, the Florentine knight who founded the Vallombrosan Order, are frequently paired with those of Saint Benedict, including on the panel painted by Alessio Baldovinetti c. 1470 for the church of Santa Trinità (Fig. 4.28), now in the Accademia in Florence. In celebrating Saint Benedict, the Benedictines have long emphasized Old Testament prophets in their literary and artistic traditions.¹¹⁶ The sixth-century *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, which includes a biography of Saint Benedict, highlights Saint Benedict's own prophetic gifts. In the *Dialogues*, Benedict is compared specifically to King David.¹¹⁷ David is also a figure in the hagiography of Giovanni Gualberto; his biographers describe how on his deathbed, the saint repeated unceasingly the famous prayer words 'of David' from Psalm 23.¹¹⁸ He is the most prominent of the figures in the lower portion of the panel; in contrast to the subdued colours worn by Jeremiah, Isaiah and Abraham, David wears a bright red mantle and a crown. His clothing echoes the slightly paler scarlet robes worn by Mary and Christ. David's typological relationship to Christ himself is reinforced by his position directly beneath the Christ Child. A full discussion of the potential ideological ties between Cimabue's painting and the Vallombrosans

¹¹⁴ The inscriptions feature the following texts: Jeremiah 31:22; Genesis 22:18; Psalms 131:11; Isaiah 7:14.

¹¹⁵ De Benedictis questioned whether the panel was indeed made for Santa Trinità, given the lack of obvious references to the Trinity or to the Order as she questioned whether the panel was indeed made for Santa Trinità, although her later study, cited in note 113 above, contradicts this claim. See de Benedictis, 'Riflessioni sulla Maestà', pp. 131–33.

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of the artistic traditions reflecting

the Benedictine interest in the prophets, see Fleming, 'Experiencing the Chapterhouse', pp. 139–57.

¹¹⁷ Gregory the Great, 2:21, pp. 88–89; Gregory the Great, 2:8, pp. 70–72.

¹¹⁸ For the vita of Giovanni see *Vita s. Ioannis Gualberti*, in Patrologia Latina, CXLVI, coll. 671–706, at 701; see also Spinelli and Rossi, *Alle origini*, and for further bibliography, see degli Innocenti, 'Giovanni Gualberto, santo'.

is beyond the scope of the present study, but Cimabue's unusual inclusion of the prophets in the Santa Trinità Maestà may allude to Giovanni Gualberto and to the Order's Benedictine heritage.

My proposal here is that several religious orders in Cimabue's day strove to assert their communal identity via novel adaptations of the traditional Maestà iconography. I should say clearly, however, that my suggestion should not be taken as universal. Not every Marian image bears the obvious stamp of its patron, and the use of particular motifs that seem relevant to a specific order were often appropriated in works commissioned by other orders. An obvious example speaking to these qualifications is Duccio's Rucellai Madonna. Although it shares some 'Franciscan' features with Cimabue's Pisa Maestà, such as the obliquely angled throne and the right hand of the Virgin placed in the lap of the Christ Child, it was commissioned by a lay confraternity and housed within a Dominican church. My attempts to trace the lineage of certain meaningful details in these Marian images are also limited to the works that survive.

Along with other orders, the Franciscans participated in the wider phenomenon of the popularity of large-scale Marian images. Within this context, Cimabue and his Franciscan patrons developed a specific Marian image type that commemorated the Franciscan Order's origins at Santa Maria degli Angeli. This tradition began with the Lower Church Madonna at Assisi and continued in several additional Marian images Cimabue and others painted for the Franciscans in the last decades of the thirteenth century. I am not suggesting a consistent programme of image dissemination along the lines of Dieter Blume's proposal that the mother house at Assisi closely controlled the images the Order commissioned elsewhere. It is evident, however, that the Franciscans of the late thirteenth century deployed large-scale Marian images similarly to the way they promoted images of Francis, as emblems of the distinct tenets of their Order. In wishing to commemorate the early days of the Franciscan movement, the Order deployed images similarly in the fifteenth century under the Franciscan pope Sixtus IV and later pontiffs, who granted the Porziuncola indulgence at any Franciscan church. As Marilyn Aronberg Lavin has shown, painted altarpieces created for these altars likewise strategically recalled the first years of the Order.¹¹⁹ In the late thirteenth century, the conscious repetition of commemorative Franciscan Marian imagery would have been all the more important in an atmosphere of increasing competition with other religious groups. Thus we can understand Cimabue's monumental Maestà paintings not only as objects of religious devotion, frequently the focal point of liturgical celebrations and viewed by friars and laity alike, but also as sites of collective memory and identity for the Franciscans. As I will argue further in the following chapter, a similar objective was behind Cimabue's creation of a new type of crucifix that likewise memorialized Francis' especial devotion to Christ.

¹¹⁹ See Lavin, 'Images of a Miracle', pp. 1–42.

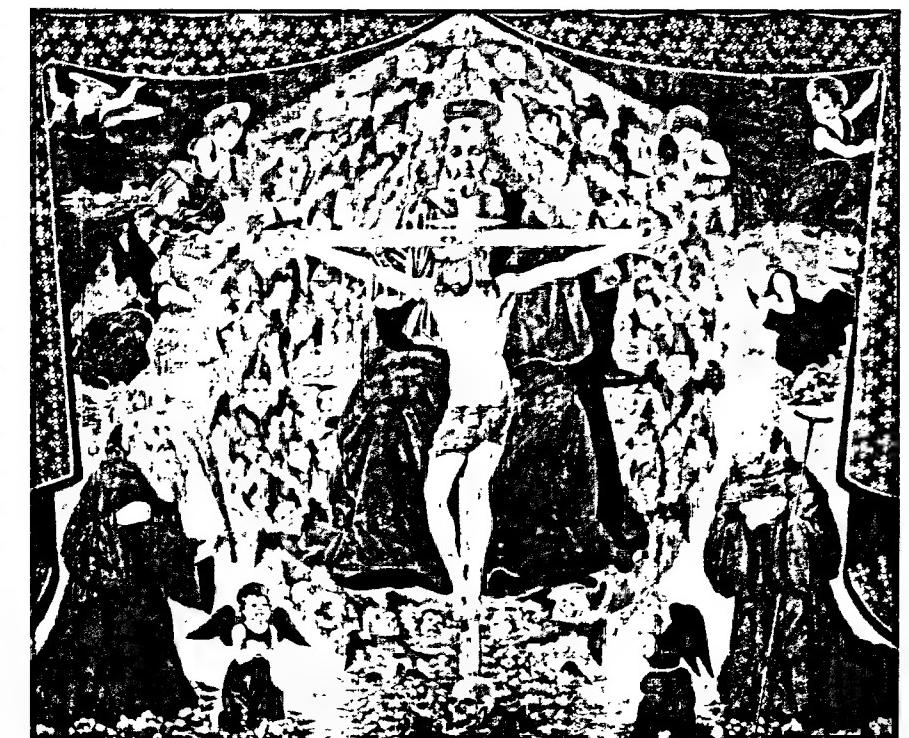
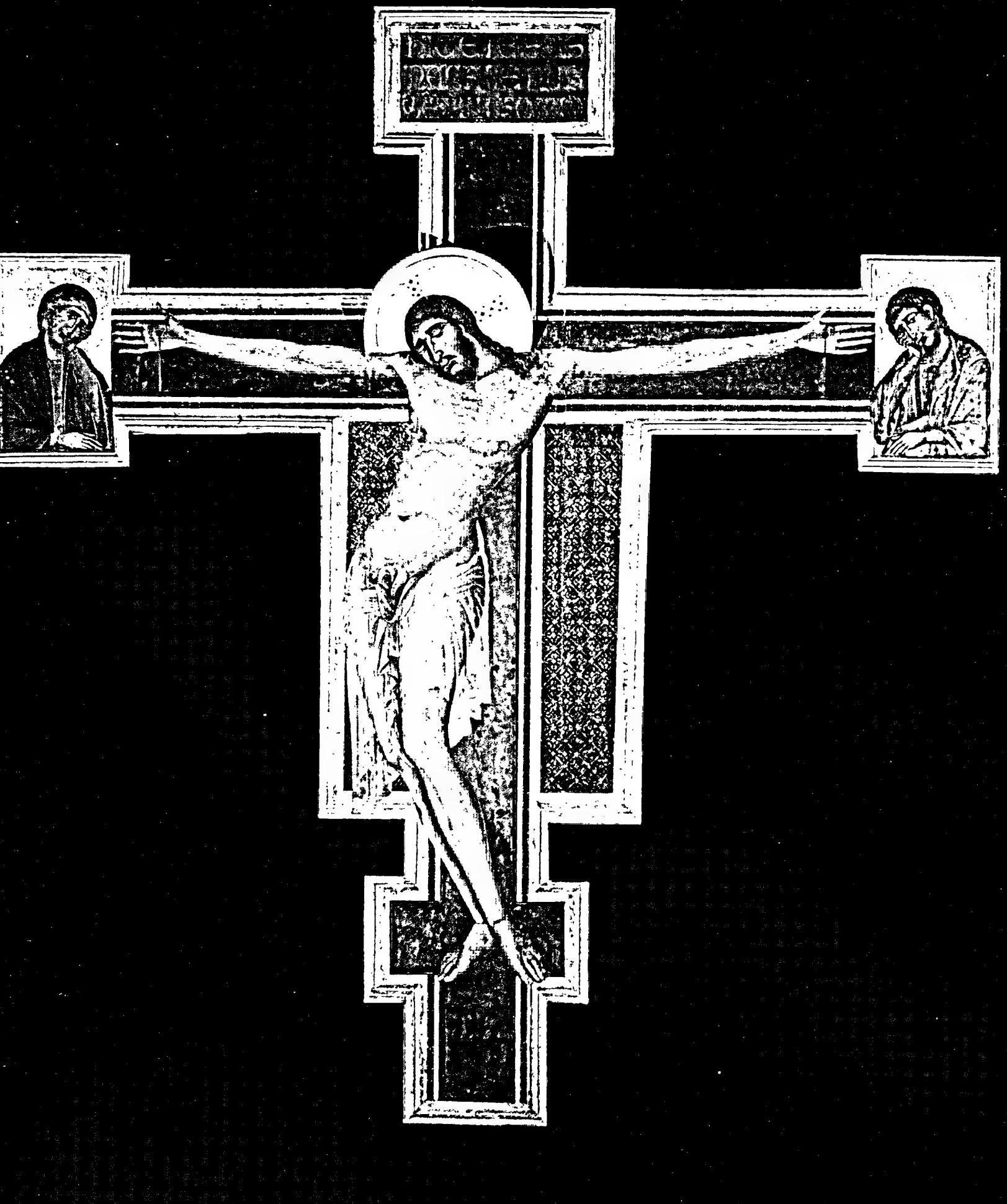


Fig. 4.28: Alessio Baldovinetti, *Trinity with St Benedict and St Giovanni Gualberto*, 238 x 284 cm, Accademia, Florence.

CHAPTER 5

Word and Paint Made Flesh: Cimabue's Santa Croce Crucifix



Cimabue was dying ... The Crucifix—by now almost without face or body—was still visible, held upright by the support that had defied the raging progress of the water. But his flesh, his painted skin, seemed to have been devastated by an explosion: the white edges of the damaged priming and canvas were curled and thrown up as though burnt, were torn into shreds which might fall off from one moment to the next. The men around me were silent; they looked at me, waiting, ready to begin work. Yet there was nothing but silence. They did not hear my voice. Instead, they saw tears—the first—on my face.¹

With these words, art restorer Umberto Baldini recounted seeing Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix for the first time in the aftermath of the flood that ravaged Florence on November 4, 1966. That day, muddy waters from the Arno inundated the Franciscan church of Santa Croce and engulfed Cimabue's cross, causing large areas of paint to bubble, crack, and peel off. Despite the best efforts by Baldini and others, the restored cross in its fragmentary state still evinces the tragedy of that autumn's deluge (Fig. 5.1). The waters tore away much of the paint surface on the right side of Christ's face, and further stripped large areas of pigment from his torso and loincloth. As Baldini remarks, 'Christ's flesh, his painted skin', was irreparably injured in the flood's devastation. The hushed crowd and the restorer's tears echo the emotional reactions to Christ's suffering that the Franciscans must have hoped the cross would inspire in devotees when it was new, seven hundred years earlier.

After the disaster of 1966, Cimabue's cross was revered as an international symbol of the flood's blow to Florence's cultural heritage. The crucifix became the emblem of the tragedy not only because of its near-loss, but also because Cimabue, as the Vasarian harbinger of the Renaissance, embodied the rich artistic heritage of Florence. For art historians writing about Cimabue in the aftermath of the flood, the Santa Croce Crucifix most clearly illustrated his place in Renaissance teleology. When the restored Crucifix was sent abroad in 1983 on a tour of major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Umberto Baldini and Ornella Casazza declared in the catalogue:

Finally free of the dark, menacing gruffness of a Coppo, far removed in the meantime from the mannered formalism of Giunta ... the Crucifix of Santa Croce introduces a clearly and precisely defined turn towards classicism into medieval Christological painting.²

1 Umberto Baldini in *Il Ponte*, November–December 1966, quoted in Baldini and Casazza, *The Crucifix*, p. 26.

2 Baldini and Casazza, *The Crucifix*, p. 23.

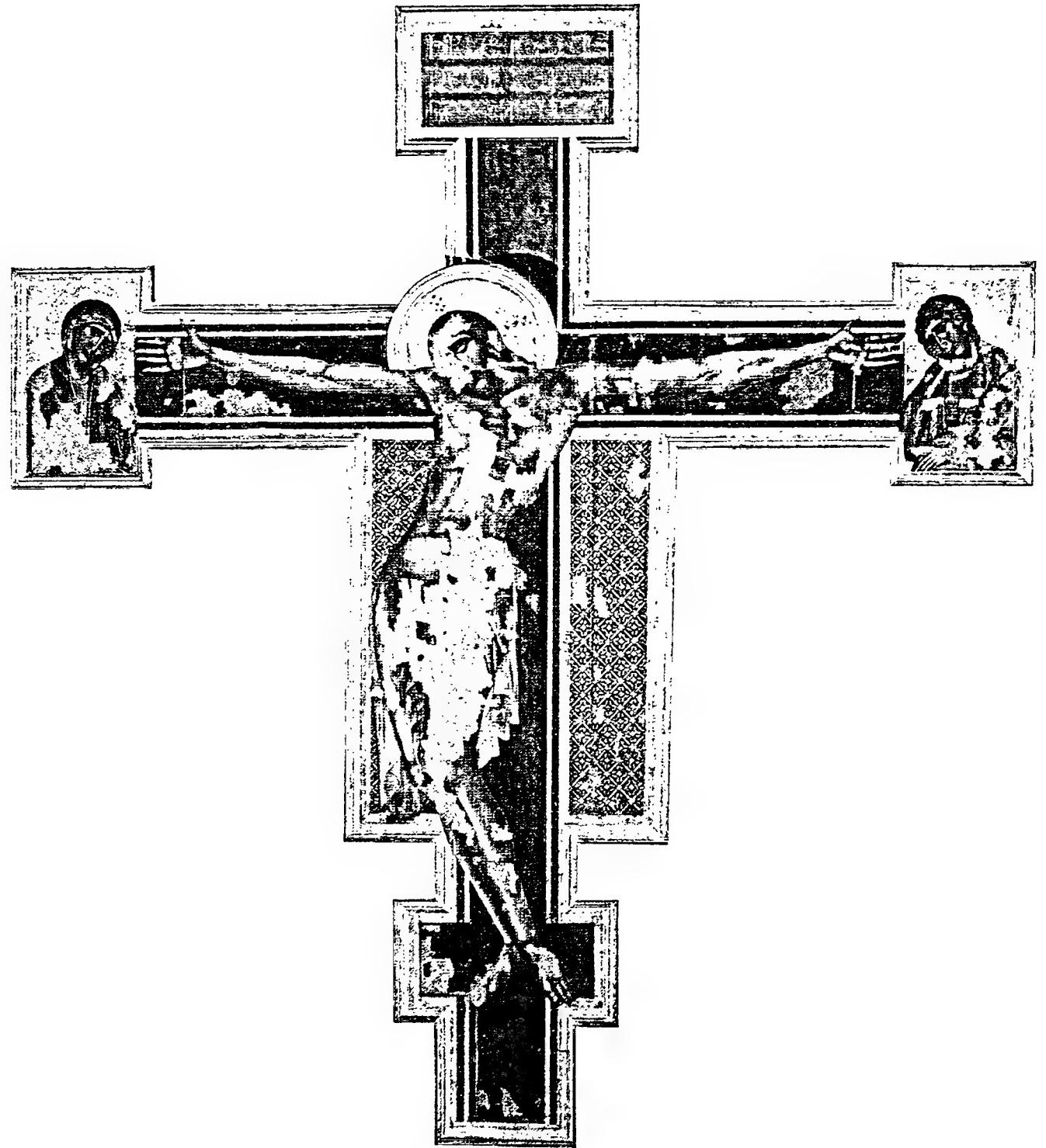


Fig. 5.1: Cimabue, Crucifix (post 1966 flood), Tempera and gold on wood, 448 x 390 cm, Santa Croce, Florence.

A similar connection between Cimabue and the advent of the Florentine Renaissance was made more recently in November of 2016 in an exhibition commemorating the flood's fiftieth anniversary. Held at the Accademia in Florence, the exhibition, '*Da Cimabue in qua: L'Accademia e i professori del Disegno nell'alluvione del 1966*', took the first part of its title from Filippo Baldinucci's seventeenth-century neo-Vasarian treatise on the lives of the artists, which began with Cimabue.³ Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix therefore continues to signify the Renaissance heritage of Florence that came under threat during the deluge.

As Baldini's statement hints, it is largely due to its novel portrayal of Christ's flesh that Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix is regarded as a watershed in these persistent narratives of Italian Renaissance painting. Compared to similar crosses, including his own earlier one painted for the Dominicans in Arezzo (Fig. 5.2), the Santa Croce crucifix has much softer, painterly brushstrokes contouring the musculature of Christ's body. The difference is most obvious in the way the skin and muscles of Christ's body are rendered, seen most clearly in photographs taken prior to 1966 (Fig. 5.3). The areas of Christ's arms, for example, where the attenuated biceps meet the elbow, are articulated with deep areas of shadow as opposed to the more schematic c-shaped lines and teardrop-shaped forearm muscles seen at Arezzo. Similarly, the schematic pattern denoting Christ's abdominal muscles at Arezzo is abandoned at Santa Croce in favor of a gentle roundness of form, marked by subtle contrasts of light and shadow as opposed to reliance on line. At Santa Croce, the pliability of Christ's flesh is echoed in the delicate, see-through loincloth he wears; both skin and clothing are portrayed with a kindred delicacy. The effect of light passing through the loincloth extends beyond the areas that cover his hips and thighs to the folds of drapery that fall away from his body, so that his torso seems gently bathed in golden light. Christ's arms especially, as well as his legs, are attenuated, pulled further from his body, enhancing the effect of the sway of his torso to the left. Both the Arezzo and Santa Croce crucifixes were probably designed to be canted forward slightly, rendering them more visible from their position at the top of a choir screen, as shown in the fresco of the Verification of the Stigmata at Assisi (Fig. 5.4). To enhance this effect, both crosses feature a sculpted halo that projects the head of Christ into the viewer's space. At Santa Croce, Cimabue further heightens the illusionism of Christ hanging by allowing his body to break the frame of the cross subtly; his thumbs encroach beyond the once-bright blue background behind him, as do also the toes of his left foot. The loincloth also penetrates the frame in a more pronounced way than at Arezzo, as its delicate folds sweep down to the right of Christ's body and drape over the apron of the cross. More than any other work of its generation, the Santa Croce

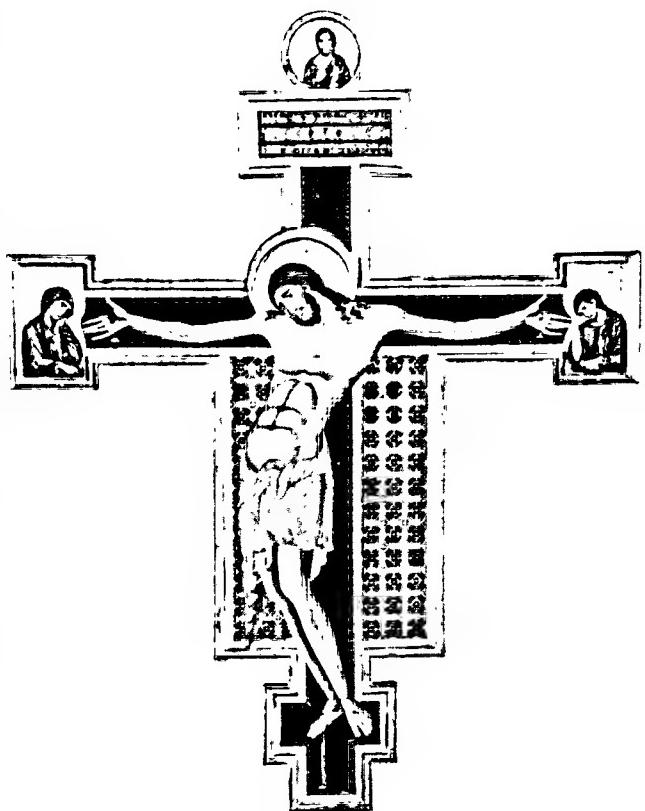


Fig. 5.2: Cimabue, Crucifix, Tempera and gold on wood, 336 x 267 cm, Santa Domenico, Arezzo.

³ For the catalogue of the exhibition, see Florence, *Da Cimabue in qua*.

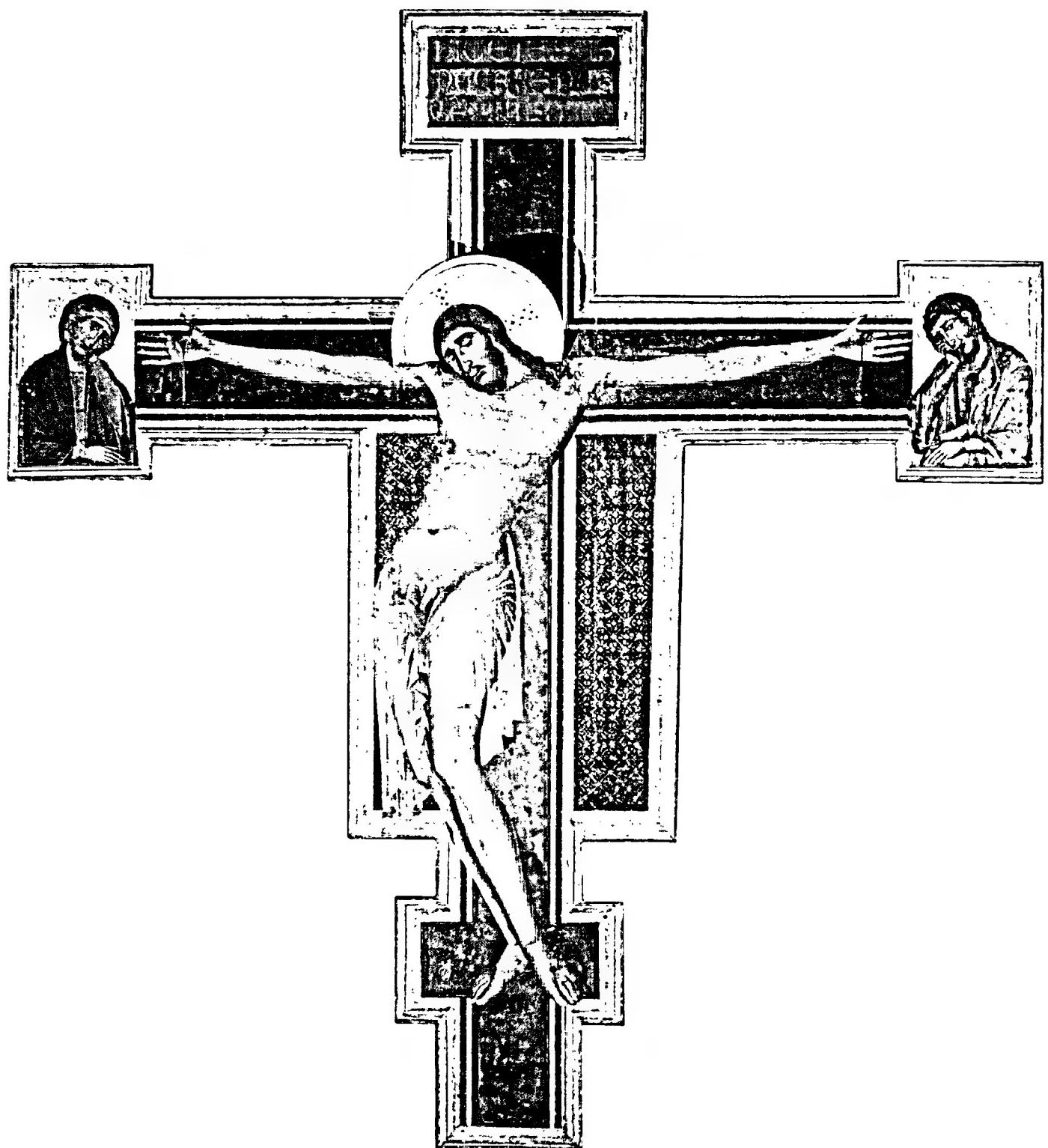


Fig. 5.3: Cimabue, *Santa Croce Crucifix* (prior to 1966 flood), Tempera and gold on wood, 448 cm x 390 cm, Santa Croce, Florence.

cross renders the presence of Christ in real space while articulating his flesh and bone with a new sensitivity.

While this comparison makes it clear that there is a transformation of visual forms effected in Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix, how are we to interpret this shift in style? As noted above, it has traditionally been seen as a step towards the 'naturalism' of the Renaissance, evidence of Cimabue's role as a bridge to the art of Giotto. Such arguments about verism are also bound up with discussions of Christ's transparent loincloth, an innovation in its time often interpreted as a device designed to reveal more of Christ's newly 'classicized' body.⁴ This chapter offers an alternate reading of Cimabue's stylistic and iconographic innovations in his Santa Croce crucifix. I argue that the novelties evident in his cross reflect Franciscan theological concerns, in particular, the importance of the Incarnation as a sign of God's nature, as well as the connection of Christ's humanity and his poverty to the devotion of Francis. Within this framework, it is possible to understand Cimabue's sophisticated rendering of Christ's form and flesh in new ways. I will first begin with a brief discussion of the architectural setting of the cross. I then proceed to a consideration of ideas of naturalism and the Incarnation current in Franciscan literature of the thirteenth century as a way of probing how viewers in the period might have understood Cimabue's innovations. Finally, I consider how Cimabue's presentation of the transparent loincloth helps to bolster Franciscan claims about the Incarnation, and also about Francis himself and his devotion to Christ's humanity.

Dating and Context

No documentation survives for the commission of Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix, but it was most likely commissioned in the 1280s. At that moment, the Franciscans in Florence decided to rebuild their church for the third time in that century. Plans for the reconstruction were drawn up in 1285, likely spurred, as Rona Goffen suggested, by the building of the impressive Dominican

⁴ As will be discussed further below, the transparent loincloth has Byzantine antecedents, but is still considered a watershed in the West. For example, Luciano Bellosi stated in 2001: 'Dopo il soggiorno romano di hanno dipinti, quali il Crocifisso di Santa Croce e la Maesta del Louvre, proveniente



Fig. 5.4: St Francis Master or Giotto, *Verification of the Stigmata*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

dalla Chiesa di San Francesco a Pisa, in cui Cimabue si presenta come rinnovato, sia per certe soluzioni antichizzanti sia per l'affinamento straordinario della sua pittura, che trova il suo Massimo nel perizoma trasparente de Crocifisso di Santa Croce, subito imitato da tutti'. Bellosi, 'Il Crocifisso', pp. 17-22.



Fig. 5.5: Giotto, *St. Francis Celebrates Mass at Greccio*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi.

church of Santa Maria Novella on the opposite side of town beginning in 1279.⁵ The repeated, ambitious building campaigns undertaken by the Franciscans speak to the growing importance of the convent of Santa Croce and its efforts to compete with the Dominicans in the city. The church was renovated yet again beginning in 1295, so little material or documentary evidence survives for its appearance at the time Cimabue's cross was probably painted. What does seem likely is that the massive crucifix, measuring over fourteen feet high and twelve and a half feet wide (176 in × 150 in, or 448 cm × 390 cm), was designed to be a focal point within the enlarged church that was planned in the 1280s. It was probably intended to be placed over the *tramezzo* of the church separating the friars' choir from the *ecclesia laicorum*.⁶ The carpentry on the back of the cross indicates that it was to be canted forward, similarly to the cross shown in the fresco of the Miracle of the Crib at Greccio at Assisi (Fig. 5.5)⁷ although Cimabue's cross was considerably larger and heavier, probably requiring chains securing it to the vault or roof above it. Cimabue's cross perhaps stood alone atop a *tramezzo*, or else it could have been the central focus of a trio of paintings including a Marian image, as discussed in the previous chapter. In either scenario, it faced the crowds gathered in the church for the celebration of Mass.

When the friars at Santa Croce hired to Cimabue to paint a crucifix, they were following a longstanding tradition of Franciscan commissions.

The Franciscans were pioneers in the popularization of a new type of monumental cross portraying Christ dead or dying on the cross, known as the *christus patiens*.⁸ Setting a trend that endured throughout the thirteenth century was a now-lost crucifix commissioned in 1236 for the Upper Church of the Basilica of San Francesco at Assisi. This crucifix was painted by Giunta Pisano, and featured a kneeling image of Elias of Cortona at the foot of the cross.⁹ Although the cross made for the Sacro Convento no longer exists, a similar image was made by Giunta for the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, as mentioned in Chapter 4 (Fig. 5.6).

Giunta's cross departed sharply from then-standard images of the *christus triumphans* that showed Christ alive on the cross. An example is the crucifix that supposedly spoke to Francis in

⁵ Goffen, *Spirituality*, 5. On the history of Santa Croce in the thirteenth century see Cacciarini, 'In Santa Croce', pp. 53–61.

⁶ There is as yet no real evidence for the kind of barrier that separated the friars' choir from the laity in the pre-1295 church of Santa Croce; it could have been a screen or a more simple 'iconostasis' beam, as shown in the Assisi fresco. On these kinds of barriers in other contexts see Cooper, 'Recovering the Lost Rood Screens', pp. 241–43.

⁷ An additional image of the blessing Christ may have originally appeared on a small tondo above the upper terminal

of the cross, as seen on the Arezzo crucifix; this element does not survive, but the cross' carpentry indicates that an additional panel was once there. For discussion of the wooden support of the crucifix, see Brink, 'Carpentry', pp. 645–53.

⁸ This shift has long been noted by art historians; see discussions for example in Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 358; Belting, *The Image and its Public*, pp. 143–48, and Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, pp. 5–7.

⁹ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, 63–72.

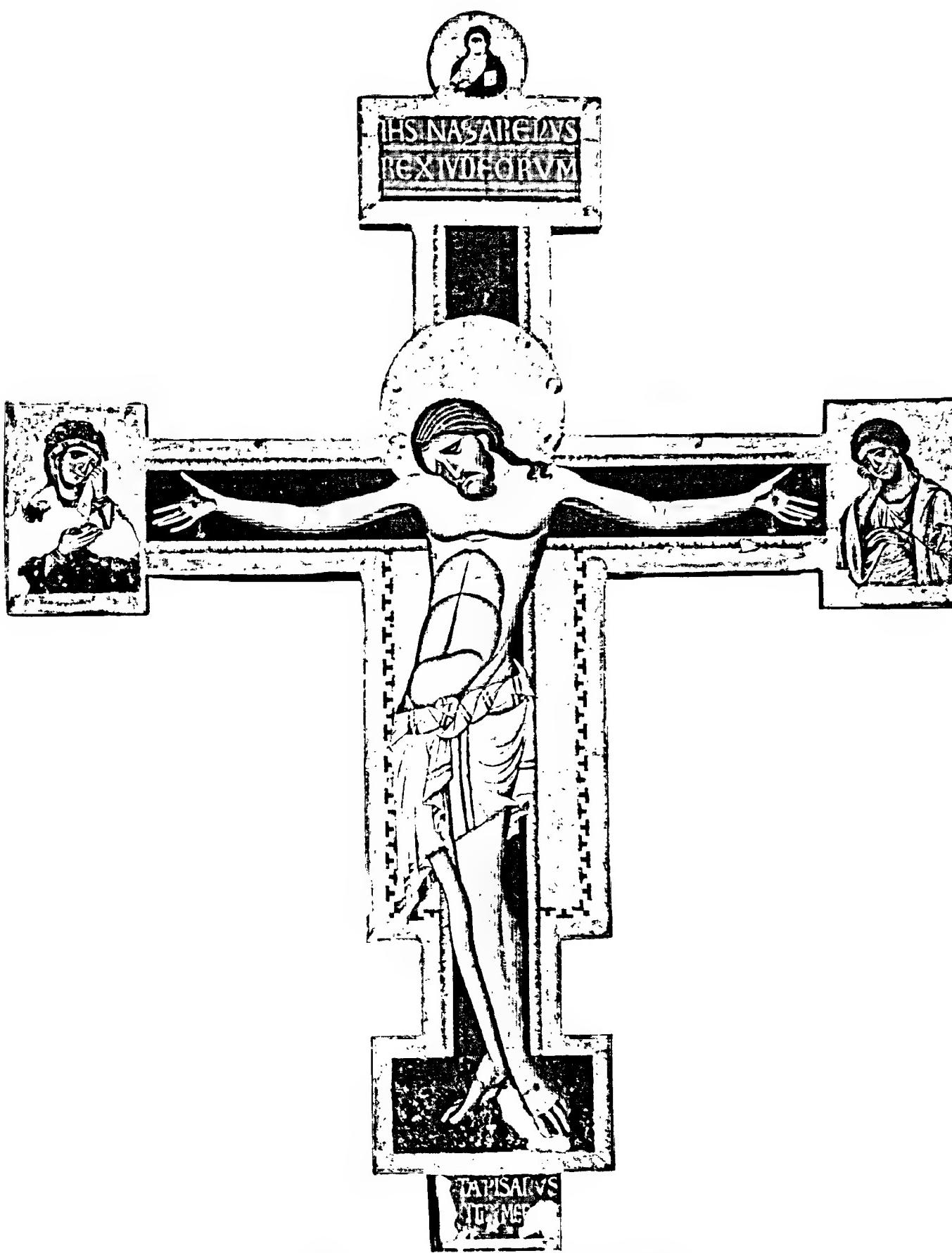


Fig. 5.6: Giunta Pisano, Crucifix, Tempera and gold on wood, 174 x 131 cm, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Assisi.

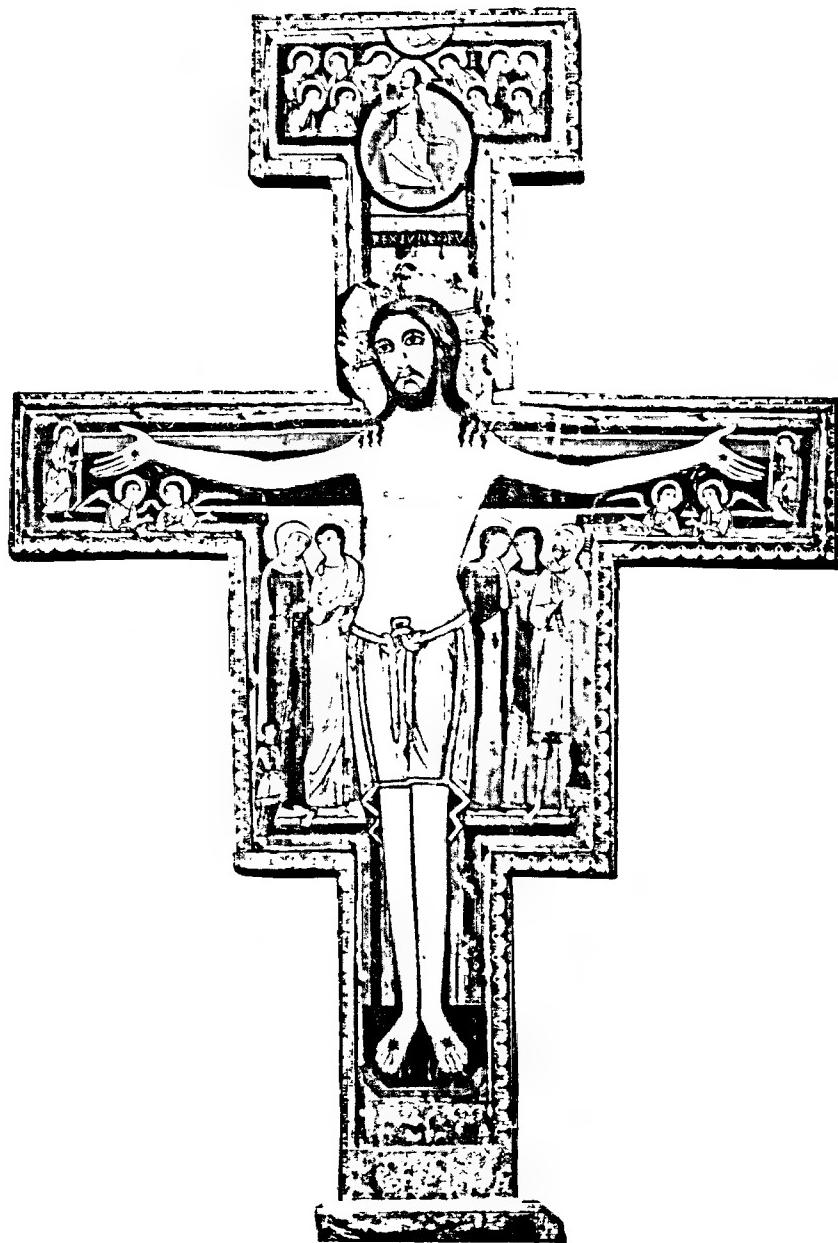


Fig. 5.7: Unknown artist, *San Damiano Crucifix*, Tempera and gold on wood, 209 x 150 cm, Basilica of Saint Clare, Assisi.

culminating in his own conformity to Christ via the stigmata. Francis' empathetic contemplation of Christ's physical anguish led to his spiritual and physical transformation. This aspect of Francis' spirituality helps to explain why the Franciscans appropriated the Byzantine *christus patiens*, but they also adapted it to suit their needs. The Franciscans, for example, often presented a figure of Francis at the foot of the cross in place of Elias as in the original rendition; the Dominicans, instead, did not include an image of their founder.¹¹ These miniature depictions of Francis, often shown gazing at the nail driven through Christ's feet, served, as Jill Bennett has shown, as models of piety for the viewer.¹² This new type of cross was thus not only significant as a means of underscoring Francis' devotion to the suffering Christ, but also helped viewers engage in the redemptive,

¹⁰ For recent treatment of this cross in context, see Bollati, *Francesco e la croce di San Damiano*, and Zappasodi, pp. 133–55.

¹¹ Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 56–63.

¹² Bennett, 'Stigmata and Sense Memory', p. 16.

the church of San Damiano in Assisi, where it still resides (Fig. 5.7).¹⁰ Here, Christ stoically gazes out to the viewer, seemingly free from physical and psychological pain. By contrast, Giunta's Christ, with his furrowed brow, slumped head, closed eyes, and bent body, communicates the savior's torturous death in clear terms. Taking cues from Byzantine representations, as artists working for the Franciscans often did in this period, Giunta also layers pigments over a green preparatory ground to create lifelike flesh tones. The combination of veristic skin with raw emotion would have made Giunta's cross and its antecedents striking for viewers in Italy in the thirteenth century. It was a Christ that, like them, experienced human pain.

The Franciscans popularized this type of crucifix; a large number of similar crosses survive from Franciscan churches, often with a miniature image of Francis kneeling at Christ's feet, as in a mid-thirteenth century example now in the Pinacoteca Communale in Faenza (Fig. 5.8). The *christus patiens* type was quickly appropriated by other orders, however, including the Dominicans, who employed Cimabue to create a cross of this genre for their church in Arezzo (Fig. 5.2). Both the Dominicans and Franciscans placed Christ's crucifixion at the centre of their devotional practices, but the Franciscans stressed its importance in relation to their founder. As noted several times throughout this study, the suffering, crucified Christ was the object of Francis' most ardent devotion, ultimately

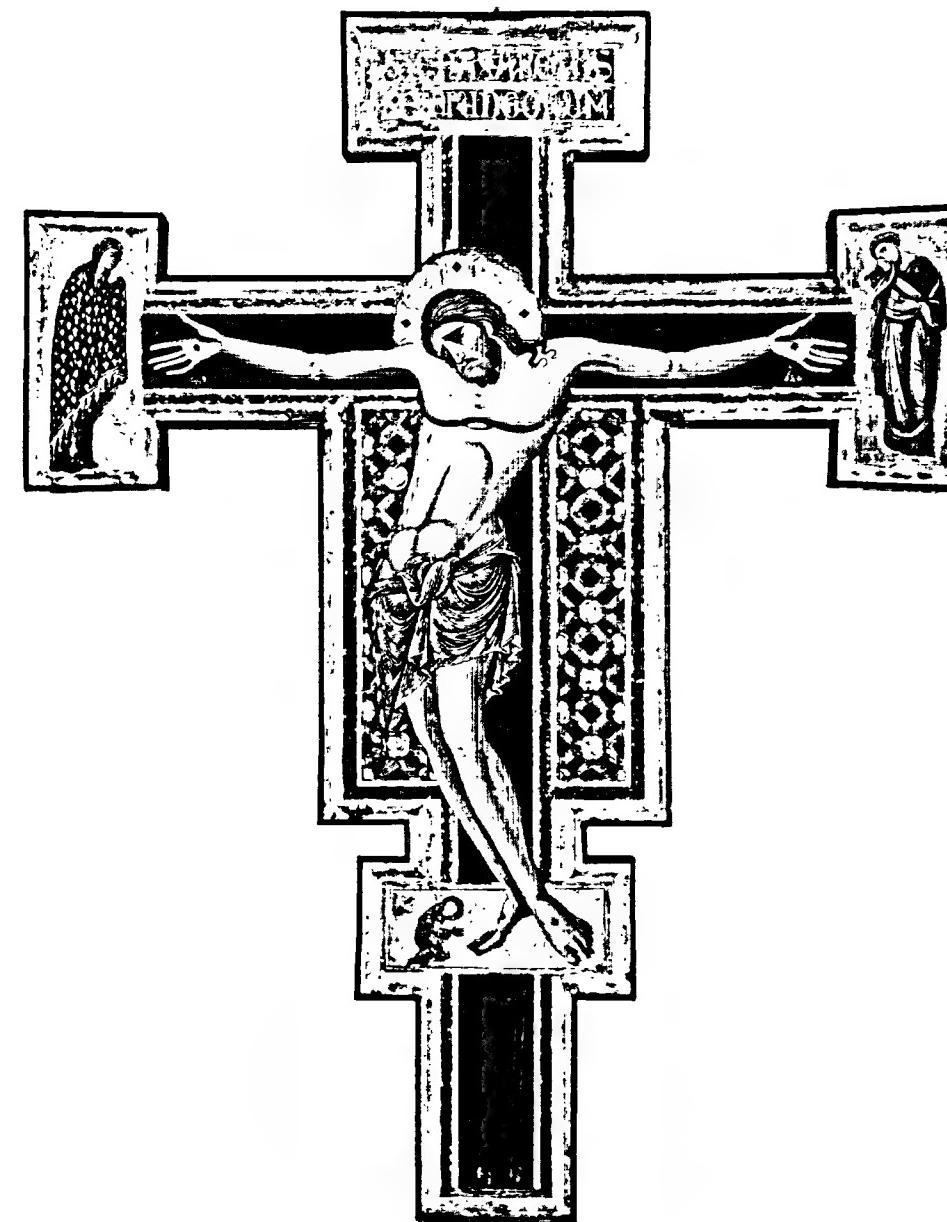


Fig. 5.8: Master of the Franciscan Crucifixes, *Painted Crucifix*, ca. 1260–1270, Tempera on wood, semi-precious stones, and glass paste, 198 x 157 cm, Pinacoteca Communale, Faenza.

transformative vision promoted by the Order.¹³ It is also noteworthy that in their efforts to promote Francis' sanctity, the Franciscans commissioned and disseminated a type of cross that would have been memorably novel for most viewers in the West at the time.

Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix follows the tradition of the *christus patiens* type established by Giunta, but Cimabue's more nuanced rendering of Christ's flesh, as noted above, would have made it distinctive, even for viewers already accustomed to images of the suffering Christ.¹⁴ As their building campaigns attest, the friars at Santa Croce were incredibly competitive, and thus had compelling reasons for commissioning a crucifix that would be noticeably different from its

¹³ Ransom, 'The Eyes Have It', p. 191.

¹⁴ Cimabue's rendering of flesh was unusual in Tuscany in the late ducento, but scholarship on the cross has pointed

to its antecedents in Byzantium. Otto Demus, for example, compared Cimabue's modeling of flesh and interest in pathos to the c. 1265 frescoes of Sopočani. See Demus, *Byzantine Art and the West*, p. 208.

predecessors. The church itself was dedicated to the Holy Cross, so the convent's identity was firmly tied to Christ's crucifixion. The friars possessed a relic of the True Cross, reportedly brought back from the Holy Land by king Louis IX of France.¹⁵ The relic and the church's dedication must have made an extraordinary monumental representation of the death of Christ all the more desirable. Cimabue's crucifix would have been the focal point for lay devotion within the church, and as such, it was also the most public symbol of the convent. The friars envisioned a new, grand space that they hoped would eclipse that of their rivals on the opposite side of the city. Although rooted in the tradition established by Giunta's cross, Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix represents a bolder means of commemorating Francis in the unprecedented attention paid to Christ's human flesh.

Naturalism and Incarnational Theology

With its emphasis on Christ's physical suffering, the formal novelties of the *christus patiens* increased its potential as a devotional object. In the medieval *ars memoria*, as Mary Carruthers and others have underscored, corporeal images of sacred subjects were designed to trigger images in the memory or in the mind's eye of the persons represented. The more striking the physical image was, the more power it had to move the viewer emotionally and prompt the devotional memory.¹⁶ An affective image was therefore also an effective image. In its distinctive presentation of the flesh and figure of Christ, Cimabue's Santa Croce Crucifix would have met the criteria for a memorable image, but it reaches beyond the emotional presentation of the dying Christ made current by Giunta. Cimabue shifts our attention even more pointedly to the actual flesh of Christ via his reliance on light and shadow as opposed to line, and via the depiction of Christ's diaphanous loincloth.

This new attention to Christ's skin has been seen as evidence of Cimabue's turn towards Renaissance naturalism, but as recent studies have emphasized, conceptions of 'naturalism' are culturally and historically specific. Would Cimabue's cross have been understood as naturalistic by viewers in his own time? Joanna Cannon recently posed the same question in regard to Giotto's Santa Maria Novella crucifix, painted c. 1290 for the Dominicans in Florence (Fig. 5.9). Cannon analyzed observations made in early fourteenth century sermons by the Dominican preacher Giordano da Pisa, as well as comments on art made c. 1400 by Cennino Cennini, author of *Il libro dell'arte* discussed in Chapter 1. Giordano's remarks indicate that images that presented holy figures in ways that were more visually convincing would have been desirable as tools to communicate the events of the Christian past. Pictures that were, according to tradition, painted by Nicodemus and Saint Luke were accurate representations because they represented eyewitness accounts. As Giordano states:

So one finds that Nicodemus paints Christ on the cross in a fine painting in that form and manner that Christ originally had, so that whoever saw the painting saw almost the whole event fully, so well was it portrayed according to the manner and figure.¹⁷

At the same time, Giordano notes that 'old paintings that came long ago from Greece', or Byzantine images not rendered in what we would consider a naturalistic style, also carried authority, 'since many saints dwelt there who painted these things'.¹⁸ Cennino, instead, states that Giotto's art represented a shift away from the Greek manner to modernity, advocating, as Cannon states, 'the practice of a thoroughgoing illusionism'.¹⁹ While it must be noted that Cennino is writing almost a century after Giordano, Cannon concludes that artists and friars in the early fourteenth

¹⁵ On devotion to this relic at Santa Croce see Thompson, 'The Franciscans and the True Cross', pp. 61–79.

¹⁶ See Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.

¹⁷ Quoted in Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, p. 64.

¹⁸ Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 63–67.

¹⁹ Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, p. 65.

century were conscious of differences in style, and that more naturalistic images were increasingly favored. Cannon's observations point towards a similar understanding on the part of Cimabue; the softened lines and pliable forms that distinguish the Santa Croce crucifix from his other works suggest that he too was attuned to stylistic differences.

Perhaps even more so than the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella, the Franciscans at Santa Croce had good reasons to be interested in an optically veristic image of Christ, particularly one that, like Cimabue's, renders Christ's flesh in a newly naturalistic way. The visual emphasis on Christ's body would prompt meditation on his humanity and thus the concept of the Incarnation. Currents in thirteenth-century Franciscan theology presented the Incarnation as a central tenet to understanding and experiencing God. Building on earlier ideas, the Franciscans were leading proponents of the notion of the primacy of Christ. The act of God taking human form was predestined from the beginning of time, and was not predicated on the Fall of mankind.²⁰ The fusion of the divine and human in Christ is in fact the very essence of his nature, and thus there is a direct relationship between humanity and God. This idea echoes the concept expressed by Saint Paul that Christ is 'the image of the invisible God, the first born of every creature' (Colossians 1:15). The duality of Christ as human and divine is part of God's created order; Christ is 'the first born of every creature' and God's image. The Dominican Thomas Aquinas made similar claims, but the insistence on Christ's essential human nature was asserted repeatedly by Franciscan writers in the thirteenth century, including Alexander of Hales, who became Bonaventure's teacher, as well as Robert of Grosseteste, Bonaventure, and most famously, John Duns Scotus in the early fourteenth century.²¹

At the time Cimabue painted his cross for Santa Croce, Bonaventure was still the primary Franciscan authority on the concept of the Incarnation. He explores the topic in depth in his *Breviloquium*, composed c. 1257 as a training manual for friars studying theology. In this treatise, Bonaventure argues that it was essential that the redeemer of mankind be God in human form:

Nor could humanity have recovered its friendship with God except by means of a suitable mediator, who could touch God with one hand and humanity with the other, who would be likeness and friend of both: God-like in his divinity, and like us in his humanity.²²

²⁰ Delio, 'Revisiting the Franciscan', pp. 3–23.

²¹ Delio, 'Revisiting the Franciscan', p. 6.

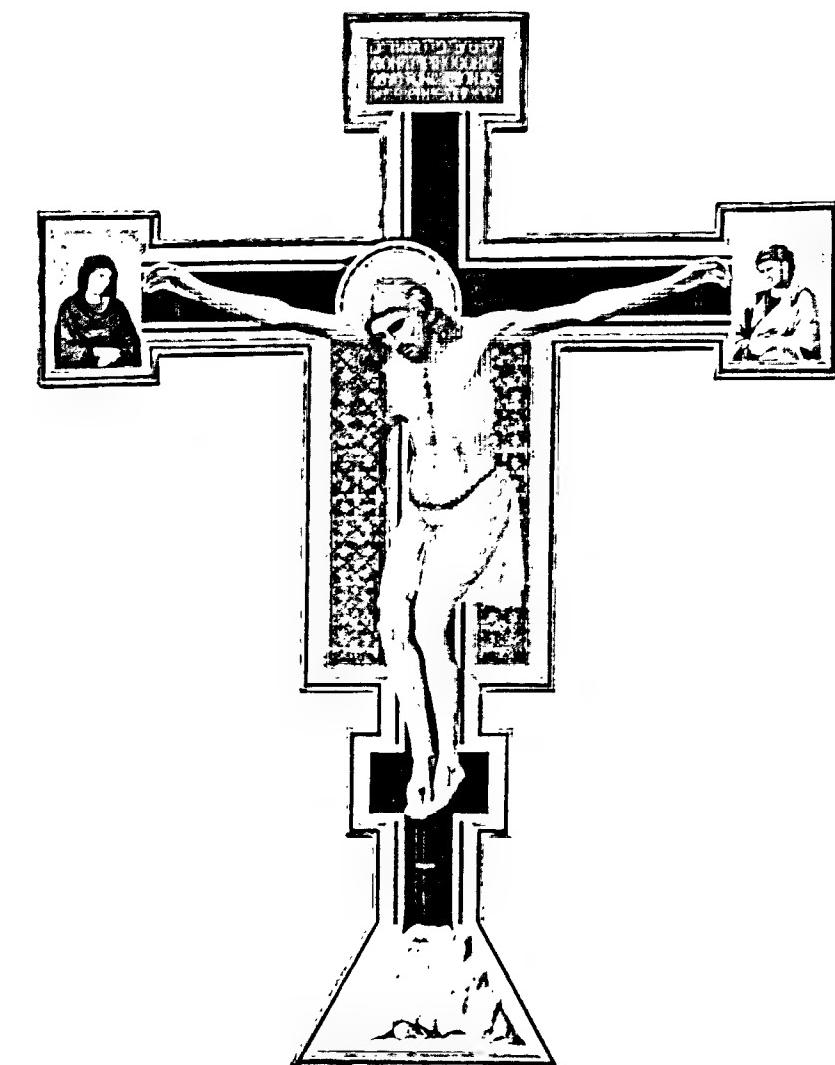


Fig. 5.9: Giotto, *Crucifixion*, Tempera and gold on wood, 578 x 406 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Here, Bonaventure asserts that the redeemer, Christ, is 'likeness' and 'like' humanity even in his divinity. Further, Bonaventure underscores that this mediator taking on human flesh is integral to the process of redemption:

Now the flesh is the part of our being most evident to us as well as the most distant from God. And so, in order that this work might be designated in the most expressive manner, so as to indicate better the humiliation [of God] and more profoundly explain the exaltation [of our flesh], it is called, not 'inanimation', but 'incarnation'.²³

In other words, God had to take on the actual, physical form of humanity in order to restore humankind's relationship to God. Bonaventure ends the section of his *Breviloquium* on the Incarnation with a discourse on Christ's Passion, asserting that the suffering of Christ is integral to his experience of humanity; he 'suffered in his human nature an all-encompassing passion'.²⁴ An image like Cimabue's that draws the viewer's attention to the vulnerable, soft forms of Christ's flesh would encourage contemplation of his human nature, heightening the empathetic potential for a viewer meditating on his Passion.

Uncovering Christ's Loincloth

Related to discussions concerning Cimabue's interest in naturalism is the detail of translucent loin cloth revealing Christ's body, drawing further attention to his softly rendered flesh.²⁵ Although Cimabue's transparent loin cloth was certainly a departure from common depictions, it was not the first instance of this motif. Anne Derbes noted that Cimabue adapted the transparent loin cloth from Byzantine models, as seen for example in an icon dating to the twelfth century from Saint Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai.²⁶ Luciano Bellosi also pointed out that the transparent loin cloth appears earlier in a few examples of Tuscan painting from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and I would further add that it is found in Umbria as well, including in a twelfth century cross now in the cathedral of Spoleto (Fig. 5.10).²⁷ Despite the fact that it was not the first transparent loin cloth in the history of art, Cimabue's version had greater impact on works of his generation and the next; the transparent loin cloth becomes repeated in crosses created in Tuscany in the late thirteenth century. A crucifix by Deodato Orlandi, now in the Museo di Villa Guingi in Lucca, appears to have been modeled after the Santa Croce crucifix, and is signed and dated 1288, offering a *terminus ante quem* for Cimabue's cross.²⁸ Most famously, Giotto adopted the translucent *perizoma* for his cross painted c. 1288–90 for the Dominicans across town at Santa Maria Novella in Florence (Fig. 5.9). Giotto's cross evinces close study of that painted by Cimabue, and points again to the intense rivalry between the two orders in Florence in the period.²⁹

As a totally nude Christ was extremely rare in the thirteenth century, viewers would have understood him as newly (almost) naked in Cimabue's cross, sparking contemplation of his Incarnation. In his classic study, Leo Steinberg connected the nudity of Christ in Renaissance paintings to theological concepts of the Incarnation.³⁰ Looking at Cimabue's Santa Croce cross,

23 Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 2:4, ed. Monti, p. 137.

24 Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 9:1, ed. Monti, p. 160.

25 Baldini and Cazazza, *The Crucifix*, p. 24, state that the loin cloth is the first of its kind. See also Cole, *Giotto and Florentine Painting*, pp. 30–31.

26 Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, pp. 28–30.

27 Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 98–99; on the Spoletan cross signed Alberto Sotio and dated 1187 see Driscoll, 'Death and Life', pp. 229–50.

28 Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 100; for a summary of the arguments

for an alternate date for the cross, see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 273–74.

29 For a discussion of Giotto's crucifix in relation to Cimabue's, see Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 64–65.

30 Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*. For a further nuanced take on theological meanings of the nudity of Christ, see also Bynum, 'The Body of Christ', pp. 399–439. Recent scholarship has pointed to the multiplicity of possible responses to the nude Christ including the erotic and homoerotic; for a useful summary see Lindquist, *The Meanings of Nudity*, introduction. See also Mormando, 'Nudus nudum', pp. 171–97.

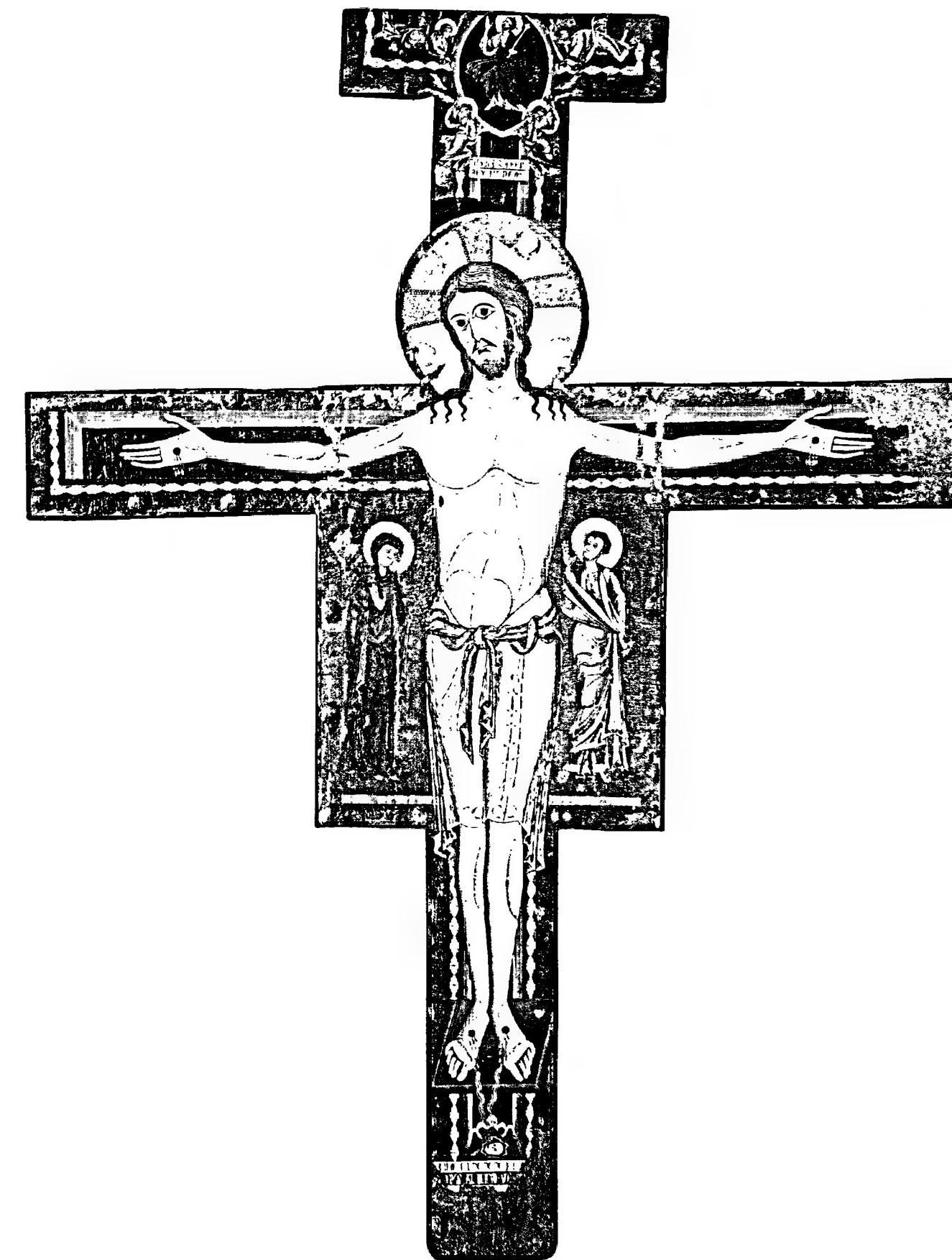


Fig. 5.10: Alberto Sotio, Crucifix, Tempera and gold on wood, Duomo, Spoleto.

Anne Derbes further argued that the see-through *perizoma* connoted the nude Christ, a key motif throughout Franciscan texts, particularly those of Bonaventure. The nakedness of Christ was equated with his poverty, an essential tenant of the spirituality of the Franciscans.³¹ Pointing to Cimabue's ostensibly naked Christ as emblem of Franciscan poverty, Derbes contended that such an image would have been especially poignant for the Florentine friars at Santa Croce in the 1280s.³² At that moment, factions within the Order clashed over the issue of the observance of poverty, and the friars at Santa Croce was at the heart of the controversy. Ultimately, for Derbes, the cross' allusions to Franciscan poverty reflect the moderate stance on the issue expressed by Bonaventure. While the crucifix celebrated the vow of poverty via its novel presentation of the nude Christ, in itself it also validated the decision of the Santa Croce friars to commission art and to spend money on the elaborate church it once graced.³³

Without questioning Derbes' conclusions, I want to nuance the meaning of Cimabue's nearly nude Christ further. One point that bears remembering is that Christ is not in fact shown totally naked; his genitals are carefully concealed by the artful knot at his waist. Although more of his flesh is revealed than in past examples, he is ultimately still covered. The choice to depict a new type of clothing that simultaneously conceals and selectively reveals the crucified Christ draws new attention to the loincloth itself. What is also puzzling about Cimabue's crucified Christ is that the transparent loincloth he wears can in itself be read as a sign of luxury, not poverty.³⁴ This garment, softly knotted, falling in gauzy folds from Christ's hips, appears to be made from the most delicate of luminous silks. It is a much different loincloth than that presented by Cimabue at Arezzo, where the bright red fabric, gleaming with gold chrysography highlights, is relatively stiff and heavy. Both kinds of fabric would have been expensive, but the kind of see-through silk that encircles Christ's loins at Santa Croce, although seemingly simple by comparison, would have been among the most costly. It resembles the diaphanous, luxurious Persian silk known as *gazzatum*.³⁵ This soft, smooth, pale silk was the absolute opposite of the stiff, scratchy, brown wool habit worn by the friars. It is also a far cry from the 'cheap loincloth' that Bonaventure describes in the Passion meditation of the *Lignum vitae*.³⁶ There is a seeming paradox here between the poverty signaled by Cimabue's almost nude Christ and the richness of the fabric that in fact clothes him. If a goal of the image is to provoke comparisons to the poverty of Francis, why present Christ's loincloth as if it were made from the kind of rich fabric Francis renounced? It is as though Cimabue and the friars at Santa Croce wanted viewers to notice two novelties: the exposure of Christ's flesh and the exotic and expensive cloth that permits it.

Cimabue's complex juxtaposition of visible body and luxurious clothing here could prompt Franciscan meditation on Christ's Passion in several ways. To uncover the first of these, it is necessary to look closely again at the leitmotif of nakedness in the *vita* of Francis, and to consider along with it the related, recurrent theme of *clothing*. Clothing, in fact, is an equally poignant metaphor in Francis' hagiography, and is frequently connected to his devotion to the cross. The transparency of Christ's loincloth also recalls the delicate fabric frequently depicted in images of the Virgin Mary, either as her veil or as a cloth she cradles against her face while witnessing her son's death. Cimabue's cross would thereby enable contemplation of Mary's role in the Passion

³¹ Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, pp. 30–32.

³² This rarity is noted by Lindquist, *Meanings of Nudity*, introduction.

³³ Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, pp. 32–33.

³⁴ I would like to thank Carl Brandon Strehlke for first suggesting this point to me.

³⁵ The word *gazzatum* derives from *gaz*, Persian for raw silk,

and is first mentioned in Europe in 1279 as originating in Gaza; see Du Cange, vol. 4, col. 49b; Several late medieval depictions of the veil of Veronica also portray this kind of transparent fabric. See Kessler, 'The Literary Warp', forthcoming; I would like to thank Herbert L. Kessler for discussing this fabric with me and sharing his unpublished research. On the fabric of Veronica's veil see also Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, pp. 210–11.

³⁶ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life* 26, ed. Cousins, p. 148.

and in the Incarnation. Additionally, the portrayal of fine cloth as a covering for Christ's body made Cimabue's crucifix especially powerful as a visual accompaniment to the celebration of the Eucharist, the bread and wine that transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

Riches and Renunciation

As has been pointed out several times in this book, the promotion of Francis' sanctity was the driving motivation behind virtually every work of art commissioned by the Order. The Franciscan trope of Christ's nudity as an emblem of his poverty was intimately connected with the late thirteenth-century exegetical insistence on Francis' closeness to Christ. Thus Cimabue's innovative presentation of the transparent loincloth at Santa Croce needs to be understood as another means of aligning Francis with Christ. A cloth merchant's son, Francis gave his cloak to a beggar, and he famously disrobed publicly as a sign of his renunciation of worldly life and his father's inheritance. Francis removed his clothing on several other occasions, even preaching after he had stripped down to his breeches.³⁷ For the Franciscans, this dramatic and repeated act of stripping indicated more than just Francis' change of vocation. In traditional monastic orders, the donning of the habit, not the removal of lay clothing, was considered the defining act of transition to the religious life.³⁸ By contrast, Francis' nakedness marked him as a voluntarily poor man in the service of Christ, the ultimate example of poverty. Likewise, Christ's lack of clothing and its removal as an element of suffering during his Passion became emblems of his poverty.

The typological link between Christ's nudity and that of Francis can be seen in the depiction of Christ stripping at the foot of the cross, painted prior to Cimabue's arrival at Assisi in the Lower Church (Fig. 5.11), where at left the badly damaged mural shows traces of Christ removing his garments.³⁹ This mural faces directly an image of Francis's renunciation of his father's wealth on the opposite wall (Fig. 5.12), creating a visual typology connecting Francis and Christ.⁴⁰ Bonaventure makes this link absolutely explicit as he concludes his description of Francis' renunciation in the *Legenda maior*: 'Thus the servant to the Most High King was left naked that he might follow his naked crucified Lord, whom he loved'.⁴¹ This trope was repeated in Bonaventure's description of the death of Francis, where he also stripped naked before he expired:

In all things he wished without hesitation to be conformed to Christ crucified, who hung on the cross poor, suffering, and naked. Naked he lingered before the bishop at the beginning of his conversion; and for this reason, at the end of his life, he wanted to leave this world naked.⁴²

The nudity of Christ, and also Francis, was therefore equated with their poverty.

It is not only the theme of nakedness, however, but also of clothing that contributes to the Franciscans' construction of Francis' sanctity. The hagiography of Francis positions dress and cloth at the heart of Francis' conversion; the first chapters of the biographies by both Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure are titled 'Saint Francis' Manner of Life in the Attire of this

³⁷ On Francis' stripping as signal of renunciation of riches see Trexler, *Naked Before the Father*.

³⁸ On the wearing of habits as sign of entry into the religious life see Warr, *Dressing for Heaven*, introduction; see also Rigaut, *Penser en images*, pp. 88–93.

³⁹ On these frescoes and the problem of their dating see Cannon, 'Redating the Frescoes', pp. 437–49.

⁴⁰ Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 111. Another depiction of Christ's stripping from about the same date

is in a fresco from the Clarissan convent of San Sebastiano near Alatri, indicating a possible early interest in this theme by female Franciscans. See the brief discussion in Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, pp. 149–53.

⁴¹ Bonaventure, LM 2:4 in FAED, vol. 2, p. 538. On the theme of nakedness in Bonaventure see Châtillon, "Nudum Christum", pp. 293–340.

⁴² Bonaventure, LM 12:4, in FAED, vol. 2, pp. 642–43.

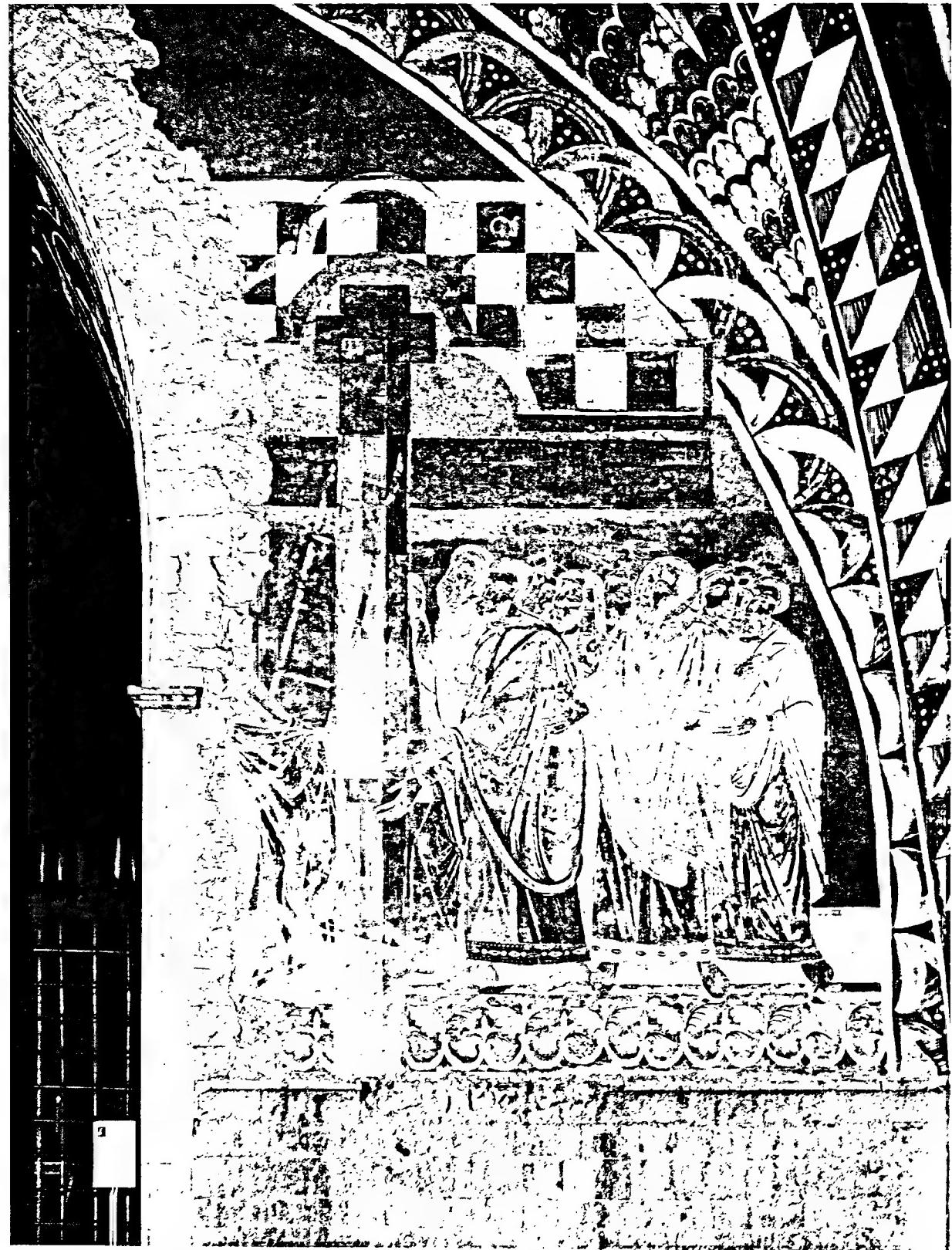


Fig. 5.11: Master of San Francesco, *The Stripping of Christ*, Lower Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

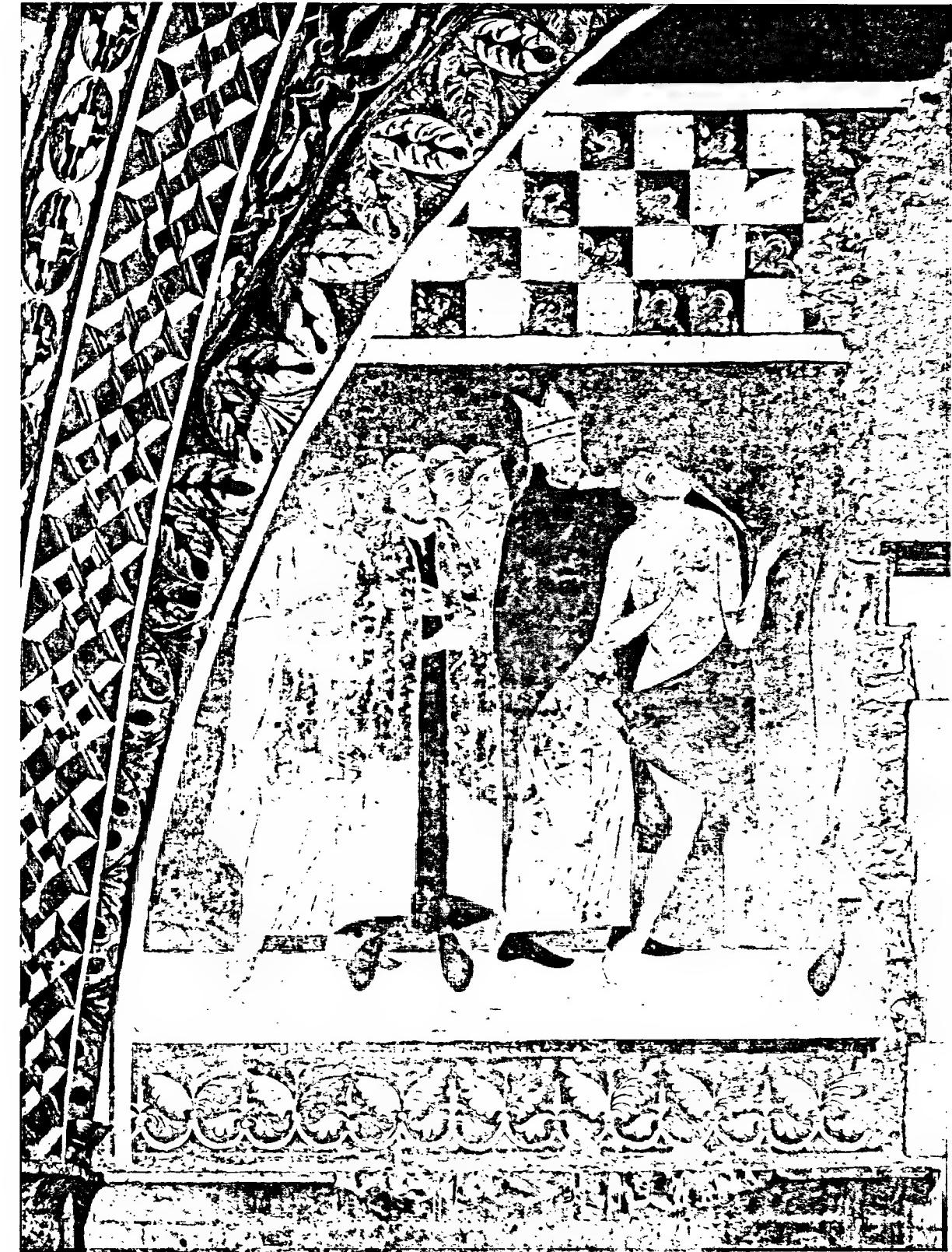


Fig. 5.12: Master of San Francesco, *St. Francis Renounces His Father*, Lower Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

World'.⁴³ Celano describes how the young Francis was a sartorial show-off; he wore 'soft and flowing garments' in efforts to outdo his equally rich friends.⁴⁴ Wishing to downplay Francis' sinful youth and invoking Paul's clothing metaphor of 'putting on Christ' from the letter to the Galatians, Bonaventure also cited clothing as a marker of spiritual change. Bonaventure writes, 'For afterwards, when [Francis] had perfectly put on Christ, he would say that even while he was in secular attire, he could scarcely ever hear any mention of the divine love without being deeply moved in his heart'.⁴⁵ Francis' spiritual transformation necessitated a change of clothing both in the literal and metaphorical sense.

Francis' devotion to Christ crucified inspired the saint's change of attire, which began with acts of giving away his fine garments. He donated his fine clothing to a poor knight, a gesture of charity that, as Bonaventure notes, saved the man from both poverty and embarrassment as a poorly dressed noble.⁴⁶ Later, after Francis had his first vision of Christ on the cross, he 'clothed himself in a spirit of poverty', increasingly giving away his clothing to poor beggars and giving help 'to poor priests ... especially in the appointments of the altar'.⁴⁷ At the end of the first chapter of his *vita*, Bonaventure recounts how Francis journeyed to Rome, and in front of St Peter's gave his clothing to the 'neediest among them' and spent the day wearing rags and begging among the poor. For Francis, fine clothing was his charitable instrument, even as he renounced its inherent luxury.

As Francis decided to forgo the attire of the world completely, fine cloth became an enabling force in his conversion, just as the poor clothing he would wear instead became a sign of his conversion. As Bonaventure tells in the second chapter of Francis' *vita*, after receiving the vision of the crucifix that spoke to him in the church of San Damiano, commanding him to 'rebuild my church', Francis sold cloth from his father's business and attempted to give the proceeds to the priest at San Damiano.⁴⁸ It was this transaction that spurred the ire of Francis' father, in turn leading to Francis' public renunciation of his father's wealth. When Francis stripped in front of the bishop in this act of abnegation, he revealed a hair shirt under his fine clothing, a sign of the duality of spirit that suggests the hidden struggle of his conversion process. With Francis in front of him completely naked, the bishop covered him with his mantle, and then commanded his servants to give Francis something to wear. The servants brought a 'poor, cheap' cloak, which Francis marked with the sign of the cross with chalk, 'designating it as the covering of a crucified and half naked poor man'.⁴⁹ A parallel episode occurred at the end of Francis' life, where, as mentioned above, Francis again stripped naked. Dying after a long illness, he requested to be brought to the Porziuncola, where:

He threw himself in fervor of spirit totally naked on the naked ground so that in that final hour, when the enemy could still rage, he might wrestle naked with the naked ... Pierced with the spear of compassion, the companions of the saint wept streams of tears. One of them, whom the man of God used to call his guardian, knowing his wish through divine inspiration, quickly got up. He took the tunic with a cord and underwear, and offered them to the little man poor man of Christ.⁵⁰

Francis' poverty therefore involved not just the rejection of fine clothing and his resulting nakedness, but also his acceptance and wearing of poor clothing from others. Francis became a recipient of charity as well as a proponent of it. Like Christ, who similarly renounced his father's wealth when taking on the flesh of humanity—also expressed biblically as a clothing metaphor—Francis put on

⁴³ On Bonaventure's use of clothing as a metaphor for Francis' former way of life and his transformation see Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 154, and the earlier discussion in Smart's *The Assisi Problem*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ Thomas of Celano, *VP*, in FAED, vol. 1, p. 183. For discussion of this theme of attire in Francis' hagiography, see Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches*.

⁴⁵ Bonaventure, *LM* 1:1, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 531.

⁴⁶ Bonaventure, *LM* 1:2, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 532.

⁴⁷ Bonaventure, *LM* 1:6, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 534.

⁴⁸ Bonaventure, *LM* 2:1, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 536–37.

⁴⁹ Bonaventure, *LM* 2:4, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 538.

⁵⁰ Bonaventure, *LM* 14:4, in FAED, vol. 2, p. 642.

the clothing of poverty, an expression of his changed, pious personhood. With its novel presentation of the transparent loincloth, a motif that would draw attention to the cloth itself as well as enable viewing of the almost-nakedness of Christ, Cimabue's crucifix enabled contemplation of Francis' particular piety as a rich man who became poor like Christ himself.

Passion and Fashion: Mary's Veil

There are still other reasons why Cimabue's luxurious silk loincloth does not resemble the 'cheap' one mentioned in Bonaventure's account of the Passion. The apparent luxury of the Santa Croce *perizoma* can be understood in the context of other Franciscan descriptions of Christ's Passion, where Christ's loincloth is fashioned from the head covering of the Virgin. In the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Mary, overcome with shame for her son, covers his naked loins with her veil just before his ascends the cross.⁵¹ As the *Meditationes*' author relates, the sight of Christ's nude body inflamed Mary's compassion:

She is saddened beyond measure, and embarrassed, because she sees him completely naked. They did not allow him even a loincloth. She rushes up, and gets close to him; she embraces him and girds him with her head covering. O in how great a bitterness is her soul now!⁵²

This episode is illustrated in a fourteenth-century manuscript of the text, where Mary is shown tying Christ's loincloth as he begins climbing a ladder to the cross (Fig. 5.13).⁵³ A similar portrayal is on a panel from a Franciscan context dated c. 1290 and now at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College (Fig. 5.14).⁵⁴ Paired with an image of the funeral of Clare of Assisi in the bottom register, the top register of the panel shows the Ascent of the Cross, where Mary covers her son with the loincloth, using it to simultaneously pull him away from the cross. As part of the Franciscans' continued interest in promoting devotion to Mary, Cimabue's innovative portrayal of the loincloth in the Santa Croce crucifix thus might prompt meditation on Mary's role in the Passion story.

In emphasizing Mary as clothier of Christ, Franciscan writers drew upon a long exegetical history. Early Christian authors employed the metaphor of cloth making to describe how Mary knit the body of Christ together in her womb.⁵⁵ The Incarnation was often compared to the wearing of flesh, like clothing. Bonaventure invokes Mary's sartorial role as he connects the Incarnation to the veneration of the Host in his *Lignum vitae*, 'But you also, my most merciful Lady, behold this most sacred garment of your beloved Son, artistically woven by the Holy Spirit from your most chaste body'.⁵⁶ Mary was also credited with covering Christ's flesh with her own clothing or garments she sewed.⁵⁷ The *Meditationes* describes how Mary gave Christ his first covering from her own clothing, swaddling the newborn with her veil.⁵⁸ Apocryphal accounts further asserted that Mary was the creator of Christ's seamless tunic mentioned in the gospel according to John (19:23). Such legends gained popularity in the later Middle Ages after the rediscovery of the relic of this tunic at

⁵¹ It should be noted here that the author of the *Meditationes* did not invent this anecdote; it appears earlier in other apocryphal texts including the early thirteenth-century *Vita beate Virginis Marie et Salvatoris rhythmica* and may be inspired by Byzantine visual motifs. See Bacci, 'Imaginariae representationes', p. 23.

⁵² John of Caulibus, *Meditations*, p. 252.

⁵³ Flora, 'Fashioning the Passion'.

⁵⁴ On this panel see the exhibition catalogue *Divine Mirrors*, cat. 1, p. 152. The panel has been variously attributed to Guido

da Siena, who also painted a similar motif in a panel now in the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent in Utrecht. That the Virgin's gesture could be interpreted as covering him or pulling him back was noted in Stubblebine, *Guido da Siena*, pp. 50–51.

⁵⁵ On this idea see Gibson, 'The Thread of Life', pp. 46–54.

⁵⁶ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life*, 2:31, ed. Cousins, p. 157.

⁵⁷ For this tradition see Carr, 'Threads of Authority', pp. 60–93.

⁵⁸ John of Caulibus, *Meditations*, p. 25.



Fig. 5.13: Unknown artists, *Christ Ascending the Cross*, Tempera and gold on parchment, 24.8 x 15.8 cm, MS 410, folio 135v, Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford.

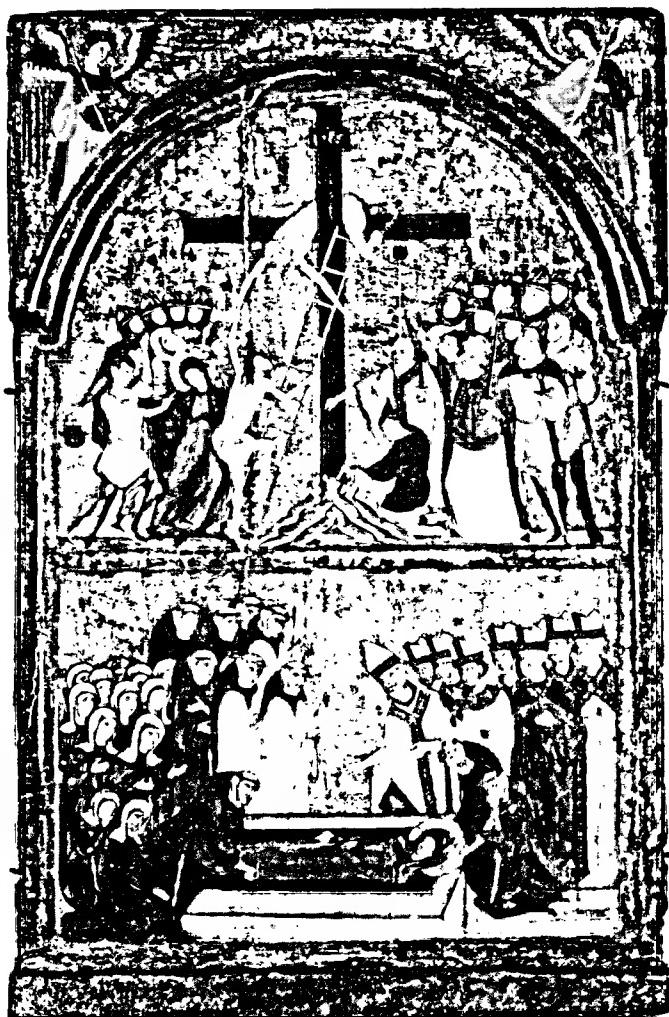


Fig. 5.14: Unknown artists, *Christ Ascending the Cross and the Funeral of Clare of Assisi*, Tempera and gold on panel, 79.4 x 51.8 cm, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College.

Argenteuil, France. The thirteenth-century chronicler Matthew Paris, among other writers, claimed that the seamless tunic had in fact been Christ's sole, lifelong garment, growing miraculously as he did.⁵⁹

Bonaventure commented that the seamless tunic signalled Mary's charity, since she provided Christ's skin as well as his clothing, acts of sacrificial love as part of God's salvific plan.⁶⁰ The connection between Christ's nudity and his poverty finds a meaningful counterpoint in Mary's provision of his attire. Mary's constant clothing of Christ, whether providing the flesh that contained his divine nature, swaddling him as an infant, crafting the seamless garment or using her own veil to cover him as he ascends the cross, was an act of Christian mercy. By clothing the poor Christ, Mary embodies one of the Seven Acts of Mercy. As outlined in the book of Luke and promoted by Christian exegetes, these Seven Acts encouraged Christians to meet the physical needs, including clothing, of the poor, who represented Christ.⁶¹ Mary herself was therefore seen as

⁵⁹ The idea of Mary knitting Christ in her womb also has its origins in Psalm 138:13. In later debates over the issue of poverty, Franciscans also cited the existence of Christ's seamless tunic as evidence that he did in fact own property. See Dzon, 'Birgitta of Sweden and Christ's Clothing', pp. 134–37.

⁶⁰ See Derbes and Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart*, p. 237.

⁶¹ On the biblical trope of the poor Christ, see Guest, 'A Discourse on the Poor', pp. 53–180.

a paragon of Franciscan, not simply Christian, poverty and charity. The *Meditationes* describes how Mary gave away her own food to the poor, and even donated the gifts of the Magi to the poor, acts that rendered her voluntarily poor.⁶² Just as Francis and Clare renounced their luxurious worldly goods, vowing holy poverty, so did Christ and Mary. A viewer could contemplate Cimabue's transparent loincloth as a sign of Mary's provision of his clothing and an emblem of her own charitable acts and voluntary poverty.

The diaphanous *perizoma* could also serve as a visual motif connecting Cimabue's cross to other Marian images within the church. As pointed out in Chapter 4, in Cimabue's monumental Marian images, Mary frequently draws attention to the clothing of the Christ Child. In the Maestà from San Francesco in Pisa, for example, the Christ Child wears several flowing garments, including a red tunic, over which is draped a pale blue mantle (Fig. 5.15). Underneath these colourful layers is another, pale garment seen peeking out above the folds of neckline of his red tunic and at his feet below it. The Christ child's leg and the Virgin's fingers are just visible through this fabric, the same fine transparent silk as depicted on the Santa Croce loincloth. It is this undergarment that the Virgin indicates with her left hand. The crucifix at Santa Croce was likely intended to be placed near a large Marian panel such as that commissioned by the Pisan friars, perhaps as a part of a trio of panels placed atop the choir screen. Whether part of a triad of images or not, the Santa Croce cross was surely not far from a monumental depiction of Mary and the Christ Child enthroned, a standard feature of mendicant churches in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The attention Mary draws to Christ's clothing in such depictions, particularly to a *gazzatum* cloth such as that shown in the Pisa panel, would remind viewers of the Christ child's ultimate destiny on the cross.

One additional unusual element of Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix serves as a clue that the transparent loincloth is in fact a garment provided by Mary. As is typical in crosses from the period, Cimabue includes a depiction of Mary on the Santa Croce cross on the left terminal, counterbalanced by the figure of John the Evangelist on the right (Fig. 5.3). It is a composition derived from Byzantine images showing Christ on the cross flanked by these two holy witnesses to the event. In many examples of crosses made in the late thirteenth century, the mourning Virgin holds a small cloth against her cheek, as seen in Cimabue's Arezzo crucifix (Fig. 5.16). This kind of small cloth, called a

⁶² On Mary as emblem of charity for example in the Arena Chapel, see Derbes and Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart*, and in



Fig. 5.15: Cimabue, *Virgin and Child in Majesty*, Tempera and gold on wood, 424 x 276 cm, Louvre, Paris.

the *Meditationes*. See Flora, 'The Charity of the Virgin Mary', pp. 55–89.



Fig. 5.16: Cimabue, Crucifix (detail), Tempera and gold on wood, 336 x 267 cm, San Domenico, Arezzo.

mappa, appears in Byzantine images of the *Hodegetria*, where Mary gestures towards the Christ Child with an open right hand and at times holds a small cloth with her left hand. An example of this motif is in the twelfth century apse mosaic of the cathedral of Torcello (Fig. 5.17).⁶³ Hans Belting has pointed out that these handkerchief-like cloths resemble the maniple, the small cloth carried by priests as they celebrated the Eucharist.⁶⁴ The maniple was also referred to in medieval sources as a *sudarium*, a cloth to wipe away tears or sweat.⁶⁵ Images depicting Mary holding such a cloth or using it to dry her tears associate her with the priesthood, as per medieval exegesis portraying her and Christ as genealogical descendants of Old Testament priests.⁶⁶ Further, in its association of Mary with the priesthood, the maniple recalled the Eucharist and Mary's role in providing it in her offering of her body to hold that of the Savior incarnate.

On the Arezzo cross and others like it that depict Mary with the *mappa*, this motif underscores Mary's act of mourning at the cross. In Cimabue's cross made for Santa Croce, however, the *mappa* is conspicuously absent, despite the fact that the Virgin's pose and gesture are very similar to that in the Arezzo cross (Fig. 5.18). By portraying her without this cloth, Cimabue underscores Mary's charity and voluntary poverty, themes promoted by Bonaventure and the

author of the *Meditationes*. The maniple was an item of clothing that was at times conflated with a veil, particularly via the legend of Saint Veronica, where the cloth used to wipe Christ's face is referred to as a *sudarium*, a term also used to refer to a maniple. Veronica's legend recounts how she gave her veil to Christ on the road to Calvary to wipe his sweat and blood, and it became miraculously imprinted with an image of his face. As Herbert L. Kessler has shown, the popularity of the Veronica legend and the corresponding relic in Rome led to the conflation of maniple and veil in late medieval images.⁶⁷ Veronica's veil and the *mappa* were often depicted as though made of white cloth, but could also be shown as though made from transparent *gazzatum*. The elision of *mappa* and *sudarium* is even more explicit in the legend of the Volto Santo of Lucca recounted by Gervase of Tilbury. Gervase reported that Christ's loincloth became imprinted with an image of his body, and that miraculous image became copied by Nicodemus as the sculpted Volto Santo.⁶⁸ In Cimabue's crucifix at Arezzo, the *mappa* is made of transparent cloth like the Santa Croce loincloth. Whether or not Cimabue's omission of the *mappa* held by the Virgin at Santa Croce is intended as a direct reference to her provision of his *perizoma*, viewers must have been attuned to the intervisual connections between Mary and Christ's clothing.

Additional examples of images of Mary and Christ linked by depictions of transparent cloth are

63 For a discussion of the *mappa*, see Corrie, 'Coppo di Marcovaldo's Madonna del Bordone', p. 52.

64 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 160.

65 For discussion of the use of a *sudarium* in worship see Chambers, *Divine Worship*, p. 53, and for discussion of the relic of the *sudarium* as Veronica's veil, see Belting, *Likeness and*

Presence, p. 209, as well as discussion in this study, Chapter 4.

66 On Mary and the priesthood see Flora, 'Women Wielding Knives', pp. 135–37.

67 See Kessler, 'The Literary Warp'.

68 Kupfer, 'Reflections in the Ebstorf Map', p. 105.



Fig. 5.17: Unknown artists, Apse Mosaic, Torcello Cathedral.



Fig. 5.18: Cimabue, *Crucifix* (detail), 448 cm x 390 cm, Santa Croce, Florence.

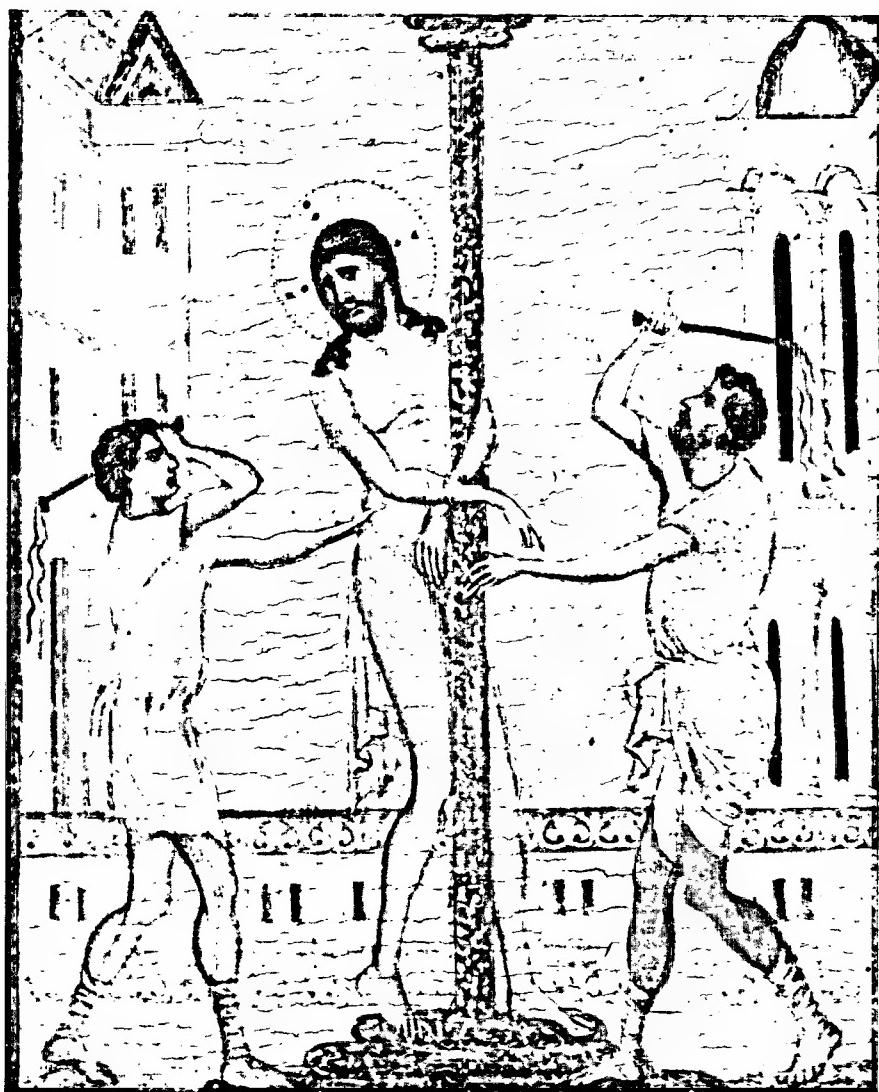


Fig. 5.19: Cimabue, *Flagellation of Christ*, Tempera and gold on wood, 24.8 x 20 cm, The Frick Collection, New York.

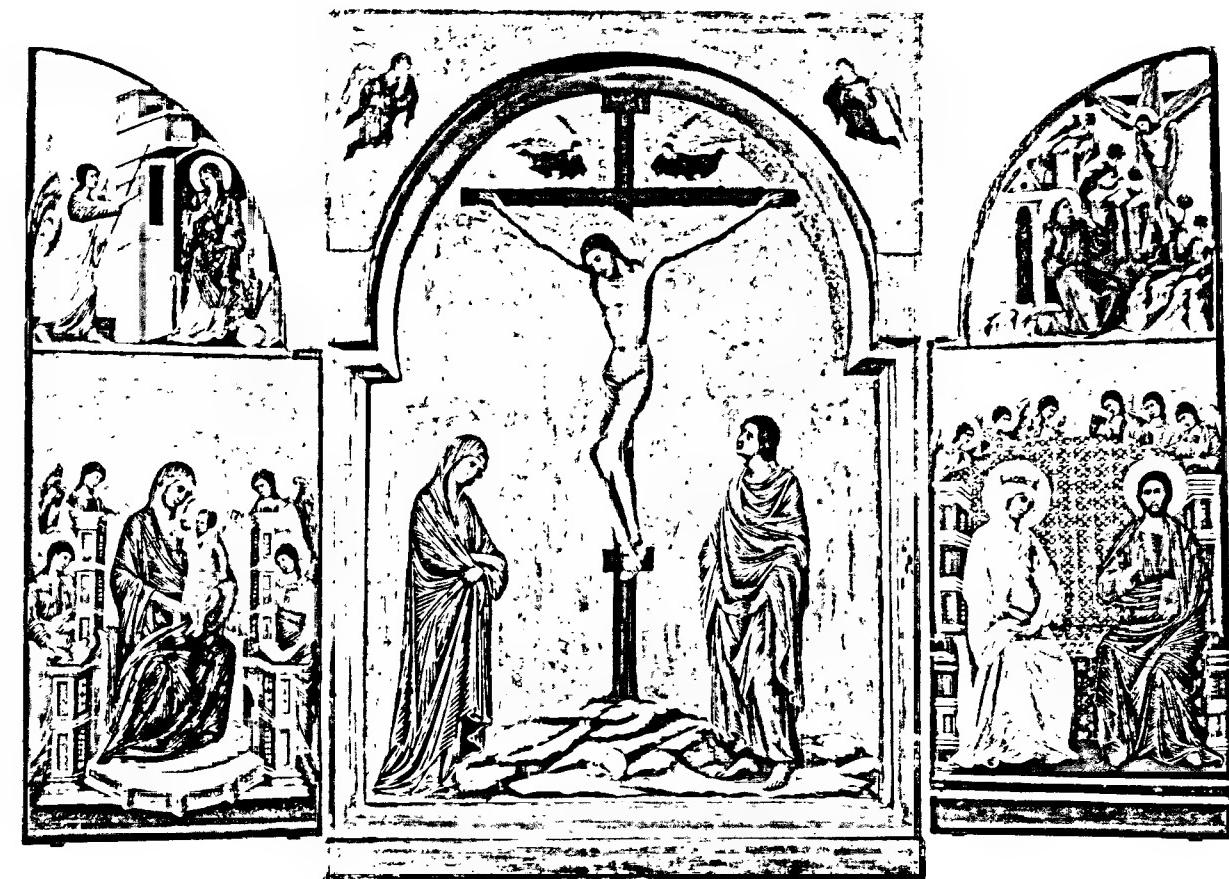
found in smaller panels used in personal devotion dating from the late thirteenth century. Two such examples are in works by Cimabue himself. A small painting now in the Frick Collection depicting the Flagellation shows Christ wearing a transparent loincloth (Fig. 5.19). As we shall see in the following chapter, the Frick panel was originally part of a larger work featuring narrative scenes that included a small panel showing the Virgin and Child Enthroned, now in the National Gallery in London (Fig. 5.20). In this depiction, one of the angels flanking the Virgin lifts a diaphanous cloth that she sits on as if showing it to the viewer whose gaze he meets as he looks outward from the painting. The Christ Child also wears the same kind of sheer undergarment seen in the Pisa Maestà, likewise indicated by the pose of the Virgin's left hand as she holds him (Fig. 5.15). Like in the larger images, these details recalled Christ's future Passion. As Victor Schmidt has shown, small scale devotional images such as these could refer to the monumental examples a devout viewer would see in a church, helping to bridge the divide between personal and corporate devotional practices.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Schmidt, *Painted Piety*, pp. 183–89. It should also be noted that transparent textiles appear frequently in Byzantine images of the Theotokos (Mother of God); see Mouriki, pp. 153–82. As has been argued by Derbes, the Franciscans

appropriated such motifs; thus while the Passion references may have been similar in a Byzantine context, the meanings of clothing references could be widened to encompass devotion to Francis as well. See Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*.



Fig. 5.20: Cimabue, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, Tempera and gold on wood, 25.6 x 20.8 cm, National Gallery, London.



5.21: Duccio, *Triptych with Crucifixion and other Scenes*, Tempera on panel, 44.9 x 31.4 cm (central panel) (support, canvas/panel/str external). Royal Collection Trust.

At a slightly later date in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, images of the Virgin and Child that draw attention to Mary's veil and Christ's clothing gained popularity. Several beautiful examples were painted by Duccio, including a small triptych now in the Royal Collection in the United Kingdom (Fig. 5.21), painted c. 1302–8.⁷⁰ As indicated by the image of Francis receiving the stigmata on the left wing, the triptych could have made for a Franciscan context, and features a Crucifixion scene at its centre in which Christ wears a transparent loincloth. On the left wing is an image of the Maestà in which the Christ child playfully tugs at Mary's white veil. Another example is found in a panel originally made for the high altar of the church of San Domenico in Perugia, and shows the Christ child wearing a translucent tunic as he grasps the edge of Mary's white veil, which is lined in a transparent cloth identical to that the Christ child dons (Fig. 5.22). The attention drawn to Mary's veil and its connection to Christ's clothing must again portend the Passion, appropriate for a setting where Mass was celebrated. As with the earlier examples by Cimabue, visual commonalities between the larger and smaller scale images would prompt contemplation of similar themes in different settings.⁷¹ Whether meditating on Christ's intimate relationship to his mother in a family chapel or imagining Mary's intervention at the cross while hearing Mass in a church, a viewer could find new meaning in Christ's clothing as an emblem of Mary's piety and charity.

Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix, although probably not designed to be placed on an altar, nonetheless functioned as a focal point for the celebration of Mass. Most likely placed atop the

⁷⁰ See the catalogue entry in Siena, *Duccio*, cat. no.29, pp. 192–97.

⁷¹ Cannon discusses high altarpieces in the early fourteenth century in Dominican contexts, see Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 139–45.



Fig. 5.22: Duccio, *Madonna and Child with Angels*, Tempera and gold on panel, 97 x 63 cm, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia.

crowds in a large church would have found it challenging to view the key event of the Mass. Large crosses like those painted by Cimabue therefore became instruments of ocular communion in themselves. Cimabue's cross therefore granted a new kind of visual access to Christ's body, by covering it in a textile that at once celebrated its sacredness while providing greater visual access to it.

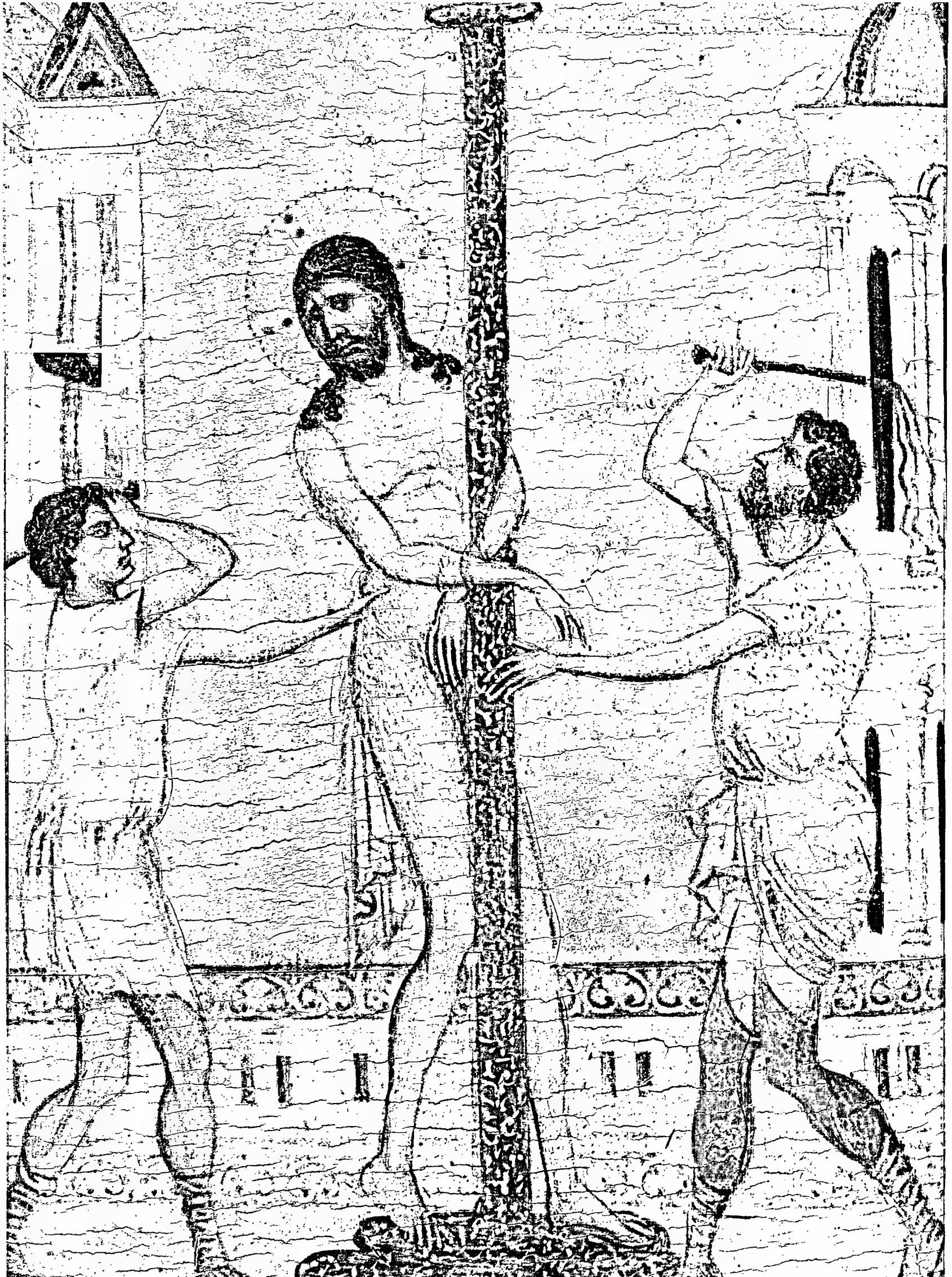
⁷² There is little surviving evidence for the *tramezzo* in Santa Croce at the time Cimabue painted his cross, but for later spatial divisions in the church see Hall, 'The *Tramezzo* in Santa Croce', pp. 325–41.

⁷³ Cooper, 'Projecting Presence', pp. 47–69.

tramezzo in Santa Croce, the enormous cross would have been visible throughout the *ecclesia laicorum*.⁷² The portrayal of Christ's body wrapped in a precious textile resembling that of a priest's maniple would remind the congregants gathered for Mass of the actual presence of Christ's body in the consecrated Host. Donal Cooper has recently proposed that the similarly luxurious textiles depicted on the aprons of monumental crosses were evocative of the richly coloured silks used as altar cloths.⁷³ Viewers could therefore easily connect the body of Christ silhouetted against these fabrics, knowns as *tappeti decorativi*, with the bread and wine transformed on the altar.

Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix features a lush *tappeto decorativo* painted as though made from a red silk embroidered with a diamond pattern in gold thread. In its original brightness, it would have contrasted even more strikingly with the pale, gauzy loincloth. The transparent loincloth, while also allowing viewers to contemplate more of Christ's flesh, thus further enhanced the function of Cimabue's cross as a sign of the mystery of transformation taking place at the high altar. Such signals were extremely important in the late thirteenth century, as the viewing of the host had become central to Christian devotion in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Despite the careful orchestration of the elevation of the host by the priest at the high altar, sometimes accompanied by the opening of a door in the choir screen to allow the Host to be seen,

A sign not just of Franciscan poverty, but also of Christ's Incarnation, Marian devotion, and Eucharistic presence, the softly rendered flesh of Cimabue's cross, swathed in a diaphanous loincloth, allowed audiences to contemplate Christ's body in multiple ways. The naturalism of Cimabue's cross therefore reaches towards larger exegetical goals expressed by the Franciscans. An image of a poor, naked Christ who was covered and yet uncovered by an expensive piece of clothing, would effectively communicate the complex dualities of Christ's nature and of Francis' conversion. Christ was at once God and man, simultaneously stripped in poverty yet clothed in glory; Francis too was a rich man who became sanctified through voluntary poverty. Such sophisticated theological meanings might seem more comprehensible for the friars versed in the writings of Bonaventure and others, and yet Cimabue's cross is an image decidedly aimed at lay and mixed audiences. As the following chapter demonstrates, the Franciscans expected a high level of devotional literacy on the part of their lay followers as well as from the friars. Such sophisticated aspects of their spirituality are revealed in a small-scale work Cimabue created for personal devotion in a Franciscan context.



CHAPTER 6

Pictures, Words, and the Imagination in Cimabue's *Vita Christi*

In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, artists began creating a new type of object featuring a series of episodes from Christ's life mapped onto a painted panel or set of panels. An example of such a painted *vita Christi* is one by an unknown Venetian artist around 1300 and now in the Museo Sartorio in Trieste (Fig. 6.1).¹ Fashioned into a triptych in the early fourteenth century, this ensemble originally consisted of a single panel containing thirty-six scenes from Christ's life and Passion. What distinguishes it from the panels of the previous generation, like those discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, is that it features a narrative series of images without larger depictions of Christ crucified or the Virgin and Child enthroned. Instead, the story of Christ's life is the work's entire focus.

Rarely do *vita Christi* ensembles like the one in Trieste survive today intact, because they were precisely the sort of thing that enterprising dealers dissected, selling the individual scenes as independent paintings on the antiquarian market in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.² It was via such a transaction that a small painting depicting Christ's Flagellation came into the Frick Collection in New York in the early twentieth century (Fig. 6.2). In 1999, another, previously unknown fragment cut from the same work was found in a country house in England, where it had gone unnoticed for decades (Fig. 6.3). Depicting the Virgin and Child Enthroned, the panel was subsequently acquired by the National Gallery in London, where curator Dillian Gordon realized its kinship to the Frick panel. Gordon proposed that both works date to around 1280 and are by Cimabue, an assertion accepted by all major scholars.³ Technical evidence, as well as the subjects of the two panels, suggests they were once part of a series of scenes from Christ's life, a painted *vita Christi*. In this chapter, I propose that Cimabue's *vita Christi* was among the first in an emerging typology of panel paintings connected to new modes of meditation on Christ's life. The only smaller-scale, narrative work by Cimabue known, his *vita Christi* likely came from a Franciscan context. It thus illustrates how collaborations between Cimabue and the Franciscans spurred the creation of new forms of devotional art.

I will first discuss the relatively recent discovery of the Cimabue *vita Christi* ensemble in the year 2000, and suggest possibilities for its original format. An analysis of selected surviving *vita Christi* panels reveals multiple ways viewers might read, interpret, and interact with narrative Christological images. This chapter will then situate the origins of the pictorial *vita Christi* within Franciscan contexts, particularly those of the Poor Clares, the female branch of the Order named

1 On the concept of a pictorial *vita Christi*, see Ransom, *The Stein Quadrifolium*, commentary. I want to thank Lynn Ransom for encouraging me to think about the early Italian paintings as the start of the tradition she has identified. On this triptych see Van Marle, *The Development*, pp. 25–27.

2 On this phenomenon see Strehlke, 'Carpentry and Connoisseurship', pp. 41–58.

3 Gordon, 'The Virgin and Child', 32–36.

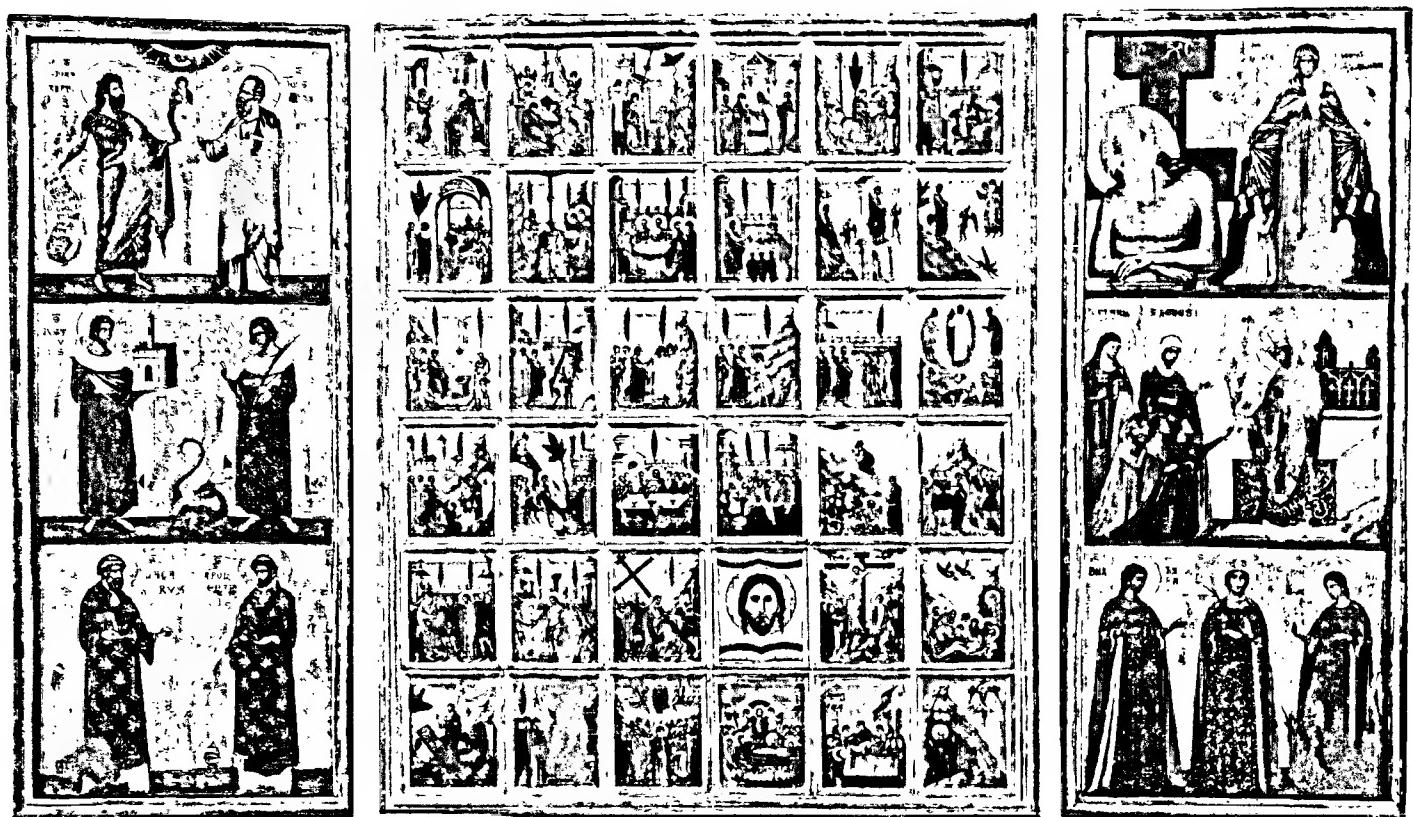


Fig. 6.1: Unknown artists, *Triptych with Vita Christi*, Tempera and gold on panel, 134 x 110 cm (central panel), Museo Sartorio, Trieste.

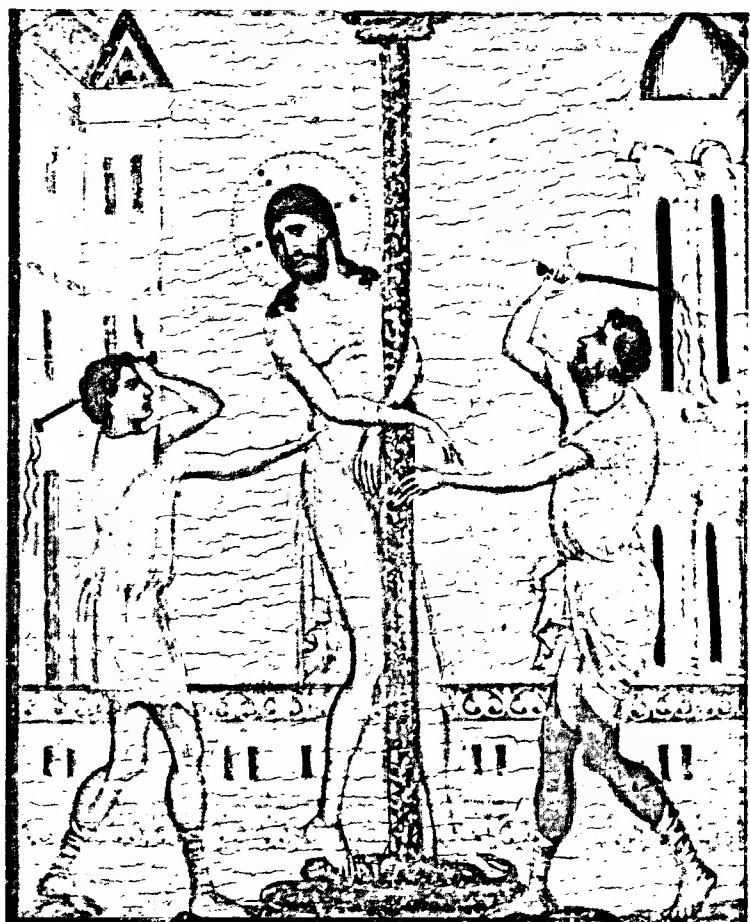


Fig. 6.2: Cimabue, *Flagellation of Christ*, Tempera and gold on wood, 24.8 x 20 cm, The Frick Collection, New York.



Fig. 6.3: Cimabue, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, Tempera and gold on wood, 25.6 x 20.8 cm, National Gallery, London.

after one of Francis' most passionate early followers, Saint Clare of Assisi. Although two of the surviving four documents in which Cimabue is mentioned are connected to nuns, no surviving work of his has yet been connected to female patronage. Cimabue's *vita Christi* was perhaps made for a Poor Clare audience, and thus offers new insights as to female agency and participation in the artistic and cultural transformations of the period.

An Incredible Discovery

The discovery of the Virgin and Child panel in 1999 was groundbreaking for many reasons. First, it settled a fifty-year old attributional debate about the Flagellation panel. The debate began with the Frick's acquisition of the painting. As noted in the catalogue of the fall 2006 Frick exhibition, *Cimabue and Early Italian Devotional Painting*, the fact that the Frick has any early Italian paintings at all is due to the particular collecting tastes of Henry Clay Frick's daughter, Helen Clay Frick.⁴ Her father did not collect Italian gold-ground paintings and in general eschewed religious works for portraits and landscapes. He preferred paintings that were, as his daughter put it, 'pleasing to live with'.⁵ It was instead Helen Clay Frick who acquired Frick's small but important collection of

⁴ See discussion in the catalogue, New York, *Cimabue*.

⁵ 'My father often rejected pictures that would have caused a discordant note or where the subjects were not pleasing to

live with...' The Frick Collection/Frick Art Reference Library Archives.

works by Duccio, Barna da Siena, Paolo Veneziano, Piero della Francesca, Filippo Lippi, and Gentile da Fabriano. During the mid-century moment in which the Frick built their early Renaissance collection, M. Knoedler and Company offered the Frick a small religious picture, a Flagellation the dealer unequivocally attributed to Cimabue. Roberto Longhi, the esteemed Italian art historian and connoisseur, heartily endorsed the painting's authorship. While the panel was being considered for acquisition, Knoedler forwarded a letter from Longhi attributing the panel to Cimabue, stating

It is one of the most revealing discoveries in the history of the thirteenth century in Italy ... in pathos, dignity of composition, beauty of palette, one cannot say other than it is a work worthy of classical antiquity, one of the most rare examples that exquisitely evokes the lost sense of ancient painting.⁶

On seeing the *Flagellation* panel, Helen Clay Frick and the other members of the Acquisitions Committee unanimously agreed, and citing the panel's rarity, quality, and beauty they immediately sought to acquire it. By February 1, 1951, the *Flagellation* was on view at the Frick, and that morning *The New York Times* heralded it as 'the best of the rare thirteenth-century Italian paintings in America'.⁷

Soon, however, the attribution became hotly disputed. In 1951, Longhi's attribution to Cimabue was challenged by another legendary art historian, Millard Meiss, one of the leading scholars of the twentieth century. Meiss attributed the *Flagellation* to Duccio, citing a 'Sienese' use of color and form.⁸ Longhi immediately countered Meiss, publishing his earlier attribution to Cimabue and noting that he had made it before the panel was altered by a restoration that removed an old varnish. In Longhi's view, it was that change of color that explained the 'Sienese' elements Meiss had discerned.⁹ Although Meiss later stated that he may have been mistaken about the attribution to Duccio, at the time he countered Longhi with an article defiantly titled 'Scusi, ma sempre Duccio' ('Pardon me, but always Duccio'), asserting that his attribution to Duccio stood nonetheless.¹⁰ Such a vehement exchange attests to the fact that the panel was internationally recognized as an unprecedented discovery. The problem of the attribution, however, remained unresolved for the next half century. In the 1968 catalogue of The Frick Collection's paintings, Bernice Davidson diplomatically assigned the painting to 'Tuscan School'.¹¹ Her broad designation reflected the irreconcilability of scholars who continued to assign the *Flagellation* to either Cimabue or Duccio.¹² Exhibited at the Frick with the label 'Tuscan School', the panel remained hidden in plain sight, neglected in studies of Cimabue's oeuvre and in the consciousness of the museum-going public.

In 1999, a serendipitous discovery dramatically tilted the balance in favor of an attribution to Cimabue. That year, the Gooch family of Benacre Hall in Suffolk, East Anglia, called Sotheby's in London to assess various works of art in their estate. One of these was a small gold-ground painting, part of the family collection since at least 1933, depicting the Virgin and Child Enthroned.¹³ Because of the formality of the image, the panel's small size, and its gleaming gold background, family members at first thought it was a Byzantine icon. But upon closer inspection, Richard Charlton-Jones, a director of Sotheby's Old Master paintings department in London, thought it might be something more extraordinary. He telephoned Dillian Gordon, curator of early Italian

6 'È una delle scoperte più sconvolgenti nella storia del '200 Italiano ... Come pathos, dignità di composizione, bellezza cromatica non si può dir altro che è un'opera degna dell'antichità classica; una delle rarissime che rievocano squisitamente il senso della perduta pittura antica'. Letter in curatorial file, The Frick Collection.

7 Loucheim, 'Rare Art', p. 27.

8 Meiss, 'A New early Duccio', pp. 94–105.

9 Longhi, 'Prima Cimabue, poi Duccio', pp. 8–13, reprinted Longhi, *Opere*, vol. 7, pp. 55–59; Longhi, 'Dei restauri', pp. 3–7,

reprinted Longhi, *Opere*, vol. 13, pp. 25–29.

10 Meiss, 'Scusi', pp. 63–63; Meiss, 'Nuovi dipinti', pp. 107–45; Meiss, 'The Case', pp. 42–63.

11 Davidson, pp. 262–65.

12 The exception is James Stubblebine, who theorized that the painting was by the Saint Peter Master, and idea that has not found acceptance. See Stubblebine, 'The Frick Flagellation', pp. 3–10, and Stubblebine, *Duccio*, pp. 5, 13, 128–29.

13 Sotheby's, pp. 184–85.

paintings at the National Gallery. In London, Gordon carefully examined the panel. She noticed that the obliquely set wooden throne and the inclined heads and open hands of the angels resembled those in Cimabue's Louvre *Maestà*. The small angels painted in roundels in the frame of the Louvre painting, which were rendered in a miniaturist style, were also close to those in the Gooch *Virgin and Child* (see Figs 6.3 and 6.4).¹⁴ Further details, such as the pattern on the orphreys (gold bands) of the angels' robes and the transparent cloth on the throne, echoed those in other works by Cimabue, adding credence to the idea that the Gooch panel was a long-lost painting by him.

Gordon then consulted Miklós Boskovits at the University of Florence, who suggested that the *Virgin and Child* panel might be related to the Frick *Flagellation*.¹⁵ Just prior to the Gooch panel's discovery, Luciano Bellosi had reexamined the attribution question of the *Flagellation* in his 1998 monograph, agreeing with Longhi's assignment of the panel to Cimabue and comparing it to the angels in the roundels bordering the Louvre *Maestà*.¹⁶ The dimensions of the Gooch and Frick panels were close, and, at least in photographs, they appeared to be related stylistically. To be certain, it was essential that the paintings be compared in person. Gordon and Charlton-Jones flew to New York with the Gooch panel so that it could be studied side-by-side with the Frick painting. A firsthand examination of the two panels in New York by Gordon as well as by Keith Christiansen and Everett Fahy, Italian Renaissance painting experts at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, revealed formal similarities such as the face of Christ in the Frick panel (see Fig. 6.2) and that of the Virgin in the Gooch panel (see Fig. 6.3).¹⁷

Technical evidence confirmed the panels' kinship. The grain of the wood, the thickness of the panels (which have both been thinned down since they were first painted), the pattern of craquelure in the paint, and even the wormholes in both paintings were found to be comparable. Both panels also featured a similar punched border in the gold ground consisting of two rows of pinprick-like punches surrounding a delicate scroll pattern formed by tiny punch marks.¹⁸ The experts concluded that the two paintings were indeed by the same artist. Additional physical clues revealed that they once formed parts of the same object. The *Virgin and Child* panel is bordered in

14 For this comparison see Gordon, 'The Virgin and Child', p. 33, Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 274.

15 Pisa, p. 236.

16 Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 118–19.

17 Weber, 'Found'.

18 Gordon, 'The Virgin and Child'.



Fig. 6.4: Cimabue, *Virgin and Child in Majesty*, Tempera and gold on wood, 424 x 276 cm, Louvre, Paris.

red along its bottom and right edge. This red border matches that along the left edge of the Frick Flagellation. These red borders are typical of those used to separate multiple narrative scenes on a single painted panel from the period. The Virgin and Child and Flagellation also show evidence of identical saw marks, as well as identical barbes, raised edges where the original frame would have been located. The two Cimabue panels, therefore, must have originally been part of the same larger work that was cut into smaller pieces.

A new painting (or at least part of a new work) by Cimabue was thus discovered, and its relationship to the Frick panel affirmed that picture's long-debated assignment to Cimabue. Understandably, the chance discovery of the Gooch panel, a picture attributed to the rarest founder of Italian Renaissance painting, caused a stir in the art world.¹⁹ Alexander Bell, head of Sotheby's Old Master paintings department, said, 'it must be the most important early Italian picture to have been on the market in a generation'.²⁰ His words echoed those of Longhi's and in the *New York Times* at the time of the discovery of the Frick Flagellation; after fifty years, the import is the same. The original plan to sell the Gooch painting at auction caused speculation as to what price it would fetch. Estimates were as high as \$15.1 million.²¹ Private individuals and important museums around the world expressed interest in acquiring it. In the end, however, the painting was never brought to the auction block and instead was acquired by the National Gallery in London as part of the British government's Acceptance-in-Lieu procedure. The painting represented a unique opportunity for an institution to own a work by this celebrated master. As Neil MacGregor, then director of the National Gallery, commented, 'The Gallery tries to tell the story of Italian painting from the Renaissance, and every history book begins with Cimabue. But we didn't have one. We've waited 170 years to find this'.²²

There is no known documentation of either panel before the twentieth century, but certain clues suggest that they both may have come from or at least passed through Pisa in the early nineteenth century on their way to the international art market. Many works of early Italian painting that had been displaced during the Napoleonic closing of churches and monasteries in Tuscany were collected in Pisa and placed under the supervision of a printmaker named Carlo Lasinio. In 1807 Lasinio was appointed keeper of the Camposanto, a sacred burial ground built during the Middle Ages, enclosed in a cloister-like building close to Pisa cathedral.²³ Decorated with frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli and other early Italian painters (regrettably almost totally destroyed during World War II) and filled with antique sculpture, the Camposanto was a must-see stop on any early nineteenth-century Grand Tourist's itinerary.²⁴ Lasinio used the Camposanto as a repository for works collected from closed churches, and he also acted as a dealer, selling pictures to eager foreign buyers. In 1829 Lasinio sent an inventory to the British collector Francis Douce detailing several paintings that had passed through his hands.²⁵ At the bottom right of the sheet is a schematic drawing of a small, rectangular-shaped panel with the label 'Madonna di Cimabue, 1200'. Gordon has put forth the tentative suggestion that this work may be the National Gallery panel.²⁶ If it is indeed that work, Lasinio may have made the attribution to Cimabue based on his knowledge of Cimabue's other works in Pisa, including the Pisa Maestà, the work scholars associate most closely with the Frick and National Gallery panels. Lasinio knew the Pisa Maestà well, for he

¹⁹ Vogel, 'Small Panel'; Moore 2000, 42.

²⁰ Vogel, 'London Museum'.

²¹ Kennedy, 'Small Picture', p. 14.

²² Kennedy, 'Small Picture', p. 14.

²³ Levi, 'Carlo Lasinio', pp. 133–48, and Strehlke, 'Carpentry and Connoisseurship', p. 53.

²⁴ Levi, 'Carlo Lasinio', pp. 133–34.

²⁵ Strehlke, 'Carpentry and Connoisseurship', p. 53.

²⁶ As she notes, this hypothesis is far from certain, given the unspecific nature of the drawing and the fact that many of Lasinio's attributions have been revised in subsequent scholarship. See Gordon, 'The Virgin and Child', p. 35. Another small Madonna and Child now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, once attributed to Cimabue is known to have passed through Lasinio's hands. See Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 267, 289.

had overseen its removal from the church of San Francesco in 1810 before it, along with Giotto's celebrated painting from the same church, was carried off to Paris by Napoleon's troops.²⁷

If the National Gallery panel passed through Lasinio's hands, then it is possible that the larger work of which it and the Frick panel were once a part, also did. A clue on the reverse of the Frick panel supports the idea that Lasinio also handled the Frick panel and attributed it to Cimabue. The Frick panel is inscribed with the name 'Cimabue' with an inventory number, and this inscription is written in a nineteenth-century hand resembling Lasinio's own. Lasinio, who considered small fragments of larger painted panels to be of little value and thus appropriate for sale, was therefore perhaps the person who sold the individual scenes of the larger work piecemeal, to patrons either in Italy or abroad.²⁸ The Flagellation had been discovered in the possession of an unnamed Italian family during the nineteenth century before it passed into the international art market to end up at Knoedler in New York.²⁹ The Gooch family speculated that Sir Edward Sherlock Gooch had purchased the Virgin and Child in Italy while he was on a Grand Tour in the early nineteenth century.³⁰ Lasinio's involvement cannot be determined for certain, but what is most tantalizing about the evidence related to him is that the Frick and National Gallery panels may have been linked to Cimabue in the early nineteenth century, further supporting a conclusion to the Meiss-Longhi debate in favor of 'sempre Cimabue'.

Cimabue's *Vita Christi*: Format and Function

Many questions remain regarding the original format and function of Cimabue's *vita Christi*. Because only two fragments have been discovered so far, we cannot be sure how large the original object was or how many scenes it contained. Based on other surviving panels by Cimabue's predecessors and contemporaries, we can say that the work containing the Frick and National Gallery panels was groundbreaking in its time. To understand why, it is helpful to consider briefly the development of narrative panel painting in Italy in the thirteenth century and the role played by the Franciscans in its popularization. Panel painting was a relatively new medium at that time, its use in Western Europe spurred by increased contact with the Byzantine world during the Crusades.³¹ Influenced in part by their connections to the Levant, the Franciscans were among the first groups to adapt the form and iconography of Byzantine icons to suit their own purposes.³² One type of icon the Franciscans appropriated early on was the *vita* icon, in which a large figure of a saint is flanked by scenes from his or her life. That format first emerged in Byzantium in the early thirteenth century. The Franciscans adapted it in their use of images to promote the cult of Francis, commissioning paintings featuring a standing figure of the saint with narrative scenes on either side.³³ Examples of early *vita* panels celebrating Francis include one painted c. 1230–35, less than a decade after the saint's death for the church of San Francesco in Pisa (Fig. 6.5), as well as a panel painted c. 1255–60 by a follower of Giunta Pisano, now in the Vatican Museums (Fig. 6.6).³⁴

²⁷ Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 274.

²⁸ Levi, 'Carlo Lasinio', p. 135.

²⁹ Before arriving at Knoedler, the Flagellation reportedly was in the possession of an unnamed Italian family, then a Mr G. Rolla, then Mr E. Moratilla of Paris, who sold it to Knoedler. See Davidson, p. 264; Letter from M. Knoedler, New York, to The Frick Collection, December 1, 1950.

³⁰ Kennedy, 'Small Picture', p. 14.

³¹ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 308, and Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, introduction.

³² For a discussion of the increasing importance of panel painting in Italy in the thirteenth century and its relationship to Byzantine traditions, see Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 349–76; for an excellent summary of the relationship between Byzantine and Western art in the thirteenth century and after, see Derbes and Neff, pp. 448–61.

³³ On the development of this type of painting see Chatterjee, *The Living Icon*.

³⁴ For an overview of these early panels see Cook, 'Introduction', pp. 1–12.



Fig. 6.5: Attributed to Giunta Pisano, *Saint Francis Vita Panel*, Tempera and gold on wood, 155 x 132.5 cm, Museo di San Matteo, Pisa.



Fig. 6.6: Attributed to Giunta Pisano, *Saint Francis and Four Scenes from His Life*, 67 x 86.5 cm, Pinacoteca, Vatican Museums.

These early works took a more traditional approach to Francis' hagiography, emphasizing his posthumous miracles and thus aligning him with the many saints of the past. Highlighting Francis' acumen as a thaumaturge, these panels advertised the saint's power and thereby aimed to inspire pilgrimage to his burial site in Assisi. The Vatican painting, for example, depicts four posthumous healing miracles on either side of the standing saint.³⁵ However, this emphasis on later miracles is not found in many of the Byzantine examples from which these Franciscan *vita* panels derive; they instead emphasized the actions of the saint while he or she was still alive.³⁶ Inspired in part by this presentation of a saint's living biography, the Franciscans began creating larger, more elaborate *vita* panels emphasizing his earthly deeds, as in the panel painted c. 1245 and attributed to an unknown master now in the Bardi chapel in Florence (Fig. 6.7). Although indebted to the earlier type of panel, the Bardi *vita* panel features twenty scenes, two-thirds of which depict scenes from Francis' life, including the now-iconic narratives of Francis Receiving the Stigmata and Francis Preaching to the Birds.³⁷

The popularity of *vita* panels celebrating Christian saints led to growing interest in panels featuring scenes from Christ's life. The Franciscans increasingly sought to distinguish Francis from other competing saints by underscoring his special connection to Christ; that relationship, they argued, was revealed uniquely in his receipt of the stigmata. As Anne Derbes has pointed out, efforts to draw direct parallels between Francis' life and that of Christ prompted new attention drawn to narrative scenes from the ultimate holy *vita*: the Gospels.³⁸ Around the middle of the thirteenth century, Christ's *vita* began to be presented in new formats of panel painting adapted from the *vita* icon tradition. These include historiated crosses on which Passion scenes flank a larger image of Christ crucified.³⁹ An example is a monumental cross painted c. 1250 now in The Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 6.8). This type became popular in Italy around the middle of the thirteenth century. Christological narratives could be likewise mapped onto large single panels,



Fig. 6.7: Bonaventura Berlinghieri, *Vita Panel, Saint Francis and Stories from his Life*, Tempera and gold on wood, 234 x 127 cm, Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence.

³⁵ On this painting see Rebecca Corrie, 'Saint Francis and Four Postmortem Miracles', catalogue no. 4 in Nashville, pp. 98–99.

³⁶ On the *vita* icon tradition in Byzantium see Ševčenko, 'The Vita Icon', pp. 149–65.

³⁷ On this panel see Brooke, 'The Image of Francis', pp. 176–92.

³⁸ Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, introduction.

³⁹ For discussion of these see Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, pp. 4–11. Another, less common type of narrative ensemble that emerged in this period was a triptych with a Marian image at the centre and narrative scenes on its wings; one example is the Madonna del Voto in Siena, which originally had wings with Christological scenes. On it see John and Manzke, *Claritas*.

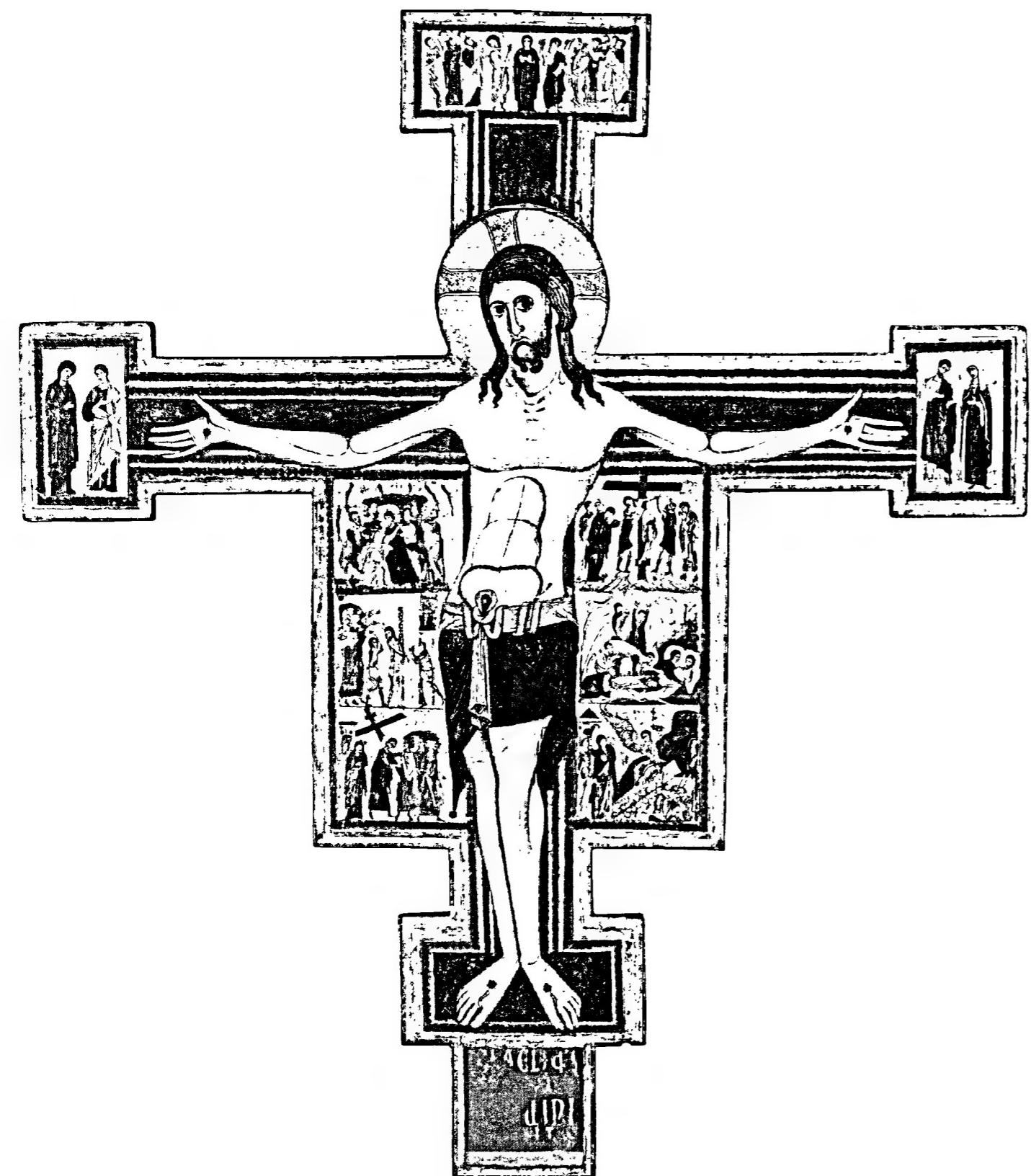


Fig. 6.8: Unknown artist, *Crucifix with Scenes of the Passion*, Tempera and gold on panel, 185 x 160 x 10.2 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund 1995.5.



Fig. 6.9: The Magdalen Master and an Unknown Florentine Painter, *Madonna and Child and Two Angels, with Twelve Scenes from the Passion*, Tempera on panel, 67.3 x 179.4 cm, Timken Museum of Art, Putnam Foundation.

often with a larger image of the seated Virgin and Child at the centre. These types of narrative panels are found either in a lateral format, such as one attributed to the Magdalen Master now in the Timken Museum in San Diego (Fig. 6.9), dated to c. 1300, or in a vertical one, as in an example painted c. 1260 by the Master of San Martino and now in the Museo di San Matteo in Pisa (Fig. 6.10). Both of these variations on the rectangular format retain the larger central figures derived from the earlier *vita* icon tradition.

The Frick and National Gallery panels certainly once formed part of a larger work that, like these examples, contained a series of Christological narratives. The size and subjects of the two Cimabue fragments, however, make them unlikely candidates to have been cut from either an historiated cross or a rectangular panel with a larger iconic figure at its centre. This deduction is based on the fact that historiated crosses frequently feature the subject of the *Flagellation*, but not the theme of the Virgin and Child; that subject instead tends to appear as the central, larger theme on vertical or horizontal panels.⁴⁰ An early example is a panel attributed to Enrico di Tedice now in the Bargello, featuring a large Virgin and Child with four smaller scenes, including the *Flagellation*, placed to her right (Fig. 6.11). Despite its unique, assymetrical arrangement, Enrico's panel conforms to a tradition already extant that combined one large scene with smaller ones flanking it. The novelty of the Cimabue ensemble is that it included instead the *Flagellation* and the Virgin and Child enthroned rendered in the same scale. Cimabue's panels therefore come from a different type of object in which these narratives are presented in new ways.

The two Cimabue panels must have been cut from a larger panel or set of panels in which Christological scenes are dominant in the overall work, taking the place of the larger central iconic figure inherited from the *vita* panel tradition. This type of panel, seemingly more related to the Byzantine calendar icon type, appears only towards the end of the thirteenth century.⁴¹ Variations

⁴⁰ Because the *Virgin and Child* and the *Flagellation* are subjects representing the beginning and the end of Christ's life, one might be tempted to think that a large number of other scenes from his life were included, and that the work was much larger. The larger Cimabue work, which is at least twenty inches tall and sixteen inches wide, could not have been tiny but would have certainly been smaller than the monumental altarpieces and crosses for which Cimabue is well known. The Santa Croce and Arezzo crucifixes measure

132 x 105 inches (336 x 267 cm) and 170 x 153 inches (433 x 390 cm), respectively, and his Pisa and Santa Trinità Maestà, at 152 x 88 inches (385 x 223 cm) are likewise massive; all of these are considerably larger than the work that once included the Frick and National Gallery panels. For the measurements of Cimabue's accepted works, see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 273–83.

⁴¹ Ševčenko, 'Marking Holy Time', pp. 51–62.



Fig. 6.10: Master of Saint Martino, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Scenes from the Lives of Joachim and Anne*, 162 x 125 cm, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa.

of the concept can be seen in single panels, such as that from Trieste previously mentioned (Fig. 6.1), with thirty-six scenes, dated to the early fourteenth century.⁴² Another example similar in date (c. 1325) is now in the Städtische Museum in Berlin and comprises sixteen smaller scenes similar in size to the Cimabue panels (ten by eight inches) surrounding two larger scenes of the Crucifixion and a half-length Virgin and Child.⁴³ Diptychs, such as one painted c. 1300 by an unknown Venetian artist, now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, with eight scenes (Fig. 6.12), could likewise contain a narrative series.⁴⁴

Many such works appear to come from the Veneto,⁴⁵ but examples can be found in Tuscany as

⁴² Garrison, nos 380–89.

⁴³ Garrison, no 381. These have also been compared to Byzantine calendar icons, see Seiler, 'Duccio's Maestà', pp. 258–61.

⁴⁴ Garrison, no 246.

⁴⁵ See Garrison nos 240–42, 244–47, and nos 380–89.

well.⁴⁶ A Florentine object that likewise features a Christological narrative series is by Pacino di Bonaguida. Painted c. 1325, it is a five-paneled, folding polyptych, now in the University of Arizona Museum of Art (Fig. 6.13).⁴⁷ In this last example, a larger scene of the Crucifixion, the climactic story from Christ's life, is at the centre, surrounded by sixteen smaller scenes. Although it is rendered in a larger scale than the narratives surrounding it, the Crucifixion is nonetheless a narrative theme as opposed to the more traditionally iconic theme of the Virgin and Child.⁴⁸ Thus all of these examples reveal a new focus on a visual continuum of stories from Christ's life.

Most of these painted ensembles date to around 1300 or to the first decades of the fourteenth century. The larger Cimabue work from which the Flagellation and Virgin and Child come, dated to c. 1280, is the earliest known example, predating all other known paintings in this format by at least 20 years.⁴⁹ Cimabue was therefore at the forefront of the development of a new type of narrative work of art. I call this new typology a painted *vita Christi*, a designation that draws attention not just to the *vita* panel type of object that inspired it, but also to a parallel emerging literary genre. The late thirteenth century saw the development of the *vita Christi*, a type of text in which Christ's life was re-told and expanded with apocryphal anecdotes and extra-biblical details. The most popular of the many *vita Christi* texts was the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* or *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, written in Tuscany in the early fourteenth century by a Franciscan friar as a devotional guide for a nun. The composer of the *Meditationes* took pleasure in expanding the Gospel narratives with stories designed to enable a reader to imagine him or herself as an actual witness to the events recounted. Through such texts, the Franciscans encouraged the devout, whether they were monastics or laypeople, to meditate intently and imaginatively on Christ's life, envisioning themselves interacting with



Fig. 6.11: Enrico di Tedice, *Virgin and Child with Passion Scenes*, Tempera and gold on wood, 110 x 71 cm, Bargello, Florence.

⁴⁶ One example is a proposed reconstructed diptych dated to circa 1320 with four scenes on each panel attributed to the fourteenth-century Florentine artist known as the Master of San Martino alla Palma. Miklós Boskovits has argued that eight individual panels now dispersed among several collections once formed this diptych, which includes the Virgin and Child enthroned in the upper left corner and the Flagellation in the lower right corner of the left valve. The size of the panels comprising this proposed diptych, each approximately twelve by eight inches, is close in size to the Frick and National Gallery panels, and in the San Martino diptych, the Virgin and Child Enthroned and the Flagellation are rendered in the same scale. In her study of the National Gallery panel published in 2003, Gordon suggested that the Cimabue work had been a similar diptych and further hypothesized a lost diptych by Cimabue including the National Gallery and Frick panels had served as a model for the San Martino alla Palma diptych. See Gordon, 'The Virgin and Child', pp. 33–34. On this proposed diptych see Boskovits, *Frühe italienische*, pp. 128–31; p. 191, no. 50. For discussion of similarly multi-scened devotional objects from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and their function, see the exhaustive study by Meschede.

⁴⁷ Although it has five panels, the Tuscan ensemble is

effectively structured as a triptych. Triptychs without a central theme or with multiple scenes on the central panel, such as Garrison number 287, were unusual before the early fourteenth century, and the Virgin and Child seems to have been the most common central theme on these triptychs. Triptychs comprising only multiple narrative scenes are rare. See Los Angeles and Toronto, cat. no. 37, pp. 193–95. Other examples of folding sets of panels with narrative scenes emerge also in the early fourteenth century; for a discussion of these see Schmidt, pp. 281–321. The earliest example discussed by Schmidt is a quadrupych attributed to Segna di Bonaventura (active c. 1298–1331), formerly in the Cini collection in Venice. See Schmidt, p. 188, figure 194.

⁴⁸ Although the Virgin and Child Enthroned is not a narrative subject in that it does not illustrate a biblical event, the Virgin and Child are sometimes shown on a throne in Adoration of the Magi scenes. The episode may therefore have been included in a narrative cycle of images from Christ's life.

⁴⁹ The date of the *Meditationes* is debated. The most recent research places it at the beginning of the fourteenth century. See Falvey and Toth, 'New Light', pp. 17–105. For arguments for a mid-fourteenth century date see McNamer 1990, pp. 235–61.



Fig. 6.12: Artist Unknown, *Eight Scenes from the Life of Christ*, Tempera and gold on wood, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, 55.11.1-2.

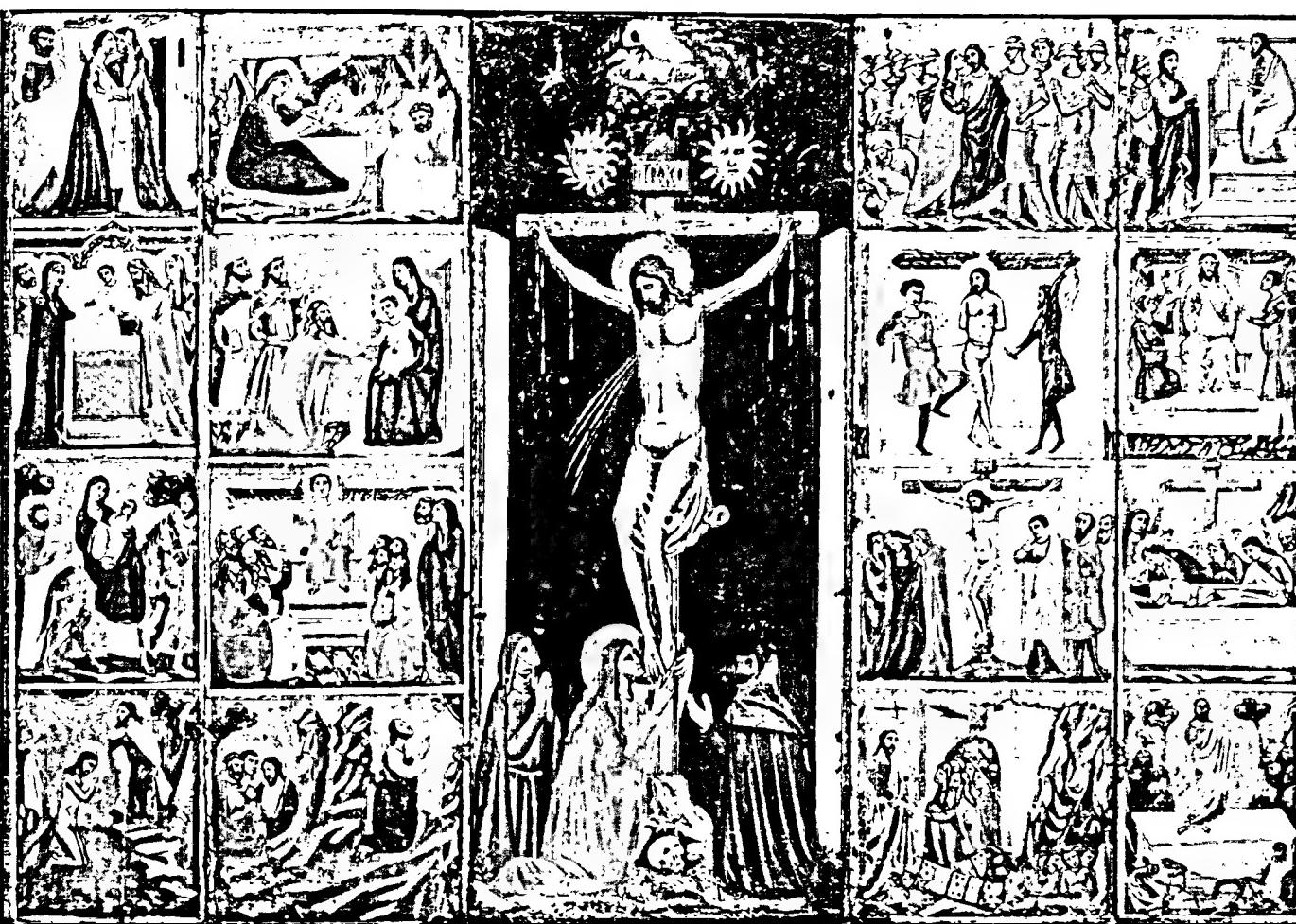


Fig. 6.13: Pacino di Bonaguida, *Crucifixion with Narrative Scenes*, Tempera and gold on wood, 17.8 x 24.5 cm, The University of Arizona Museum of Art.

Christ and witnessing the events of his life firsthand. In his prologue, for example, the author of the *Meditationes* implored his reader to

place yourself in the presence of whatever is related as having been said or done by the Lord Jesus, as if you were hearing it with your own ears and seeing it with your own eyes, giving it your total mental response.⁵⁰

The devout person was also encouraged to go beyond merely observing the events of Christ's life to become emotionally involved in his suffering as it was relived in the mind's eye. With descriptions of intimate details of each event and particular attention paid to the emotional responses of the biblical characters, such texts provoked a new kind of affective mental immersion in the life of Christ. The *vita Christi* texts developed in several different forms; long versions and shorter redactions of Christological narratives were produced, both in Latin and in the vernacular.

The lost Cimabue ensemble reflects a parallel development in the visual arts. The painted *vita Christi* took a variety of formats as we have seen, from diptychs and triptychs to single panels featuring smaller or larger numbers of scenes. More will be said about the relationship between the literary and artistic phenomena of the *vita Christi* below. For now, it is important to note that although we have little documentary evidence for the original placement and function of *vita*

Christi ensembles, their size and format suggest use by individuals or small groups. Although the genre appears in a variety of sizes, in general they are smaller than the massive panels created for the altars or rood screens of large churches. The Trieste panel is one of the larger examples, its central panel measuring about 4 feet high by 3 and half feet wide—half the size of Cimabue's Pisa Madonna, for example. The Cimabue panels are approximately 10 inches tall and 8 inches wide, only slightly larger than the individual scenes on the Virginia diptych. The scale of these objects would have made them suitable for small convent chapels or monastic cells, or else domestic use in a family chapel. The lost Cimabue work was therefore likely an intimately-scaled object designed, like the texts that emerged around the same time, to encourage personal devotion. I do not mean to suggest a direct relationship between texts like the *Meditationes* and works like Cimabue's *vita Christi*—arguments that certain visual motifs depend on texts or vice versa are not productive, and obscure the more crucial point: that texts and images in different media were part of the same cultural trends in religious devotion. The *vita Christi*, as I shall explain further below, was redacted in a variety of ways in verbal and visual forms throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

⁵⁰ John of Caulibus *Meditations*, p. 4.

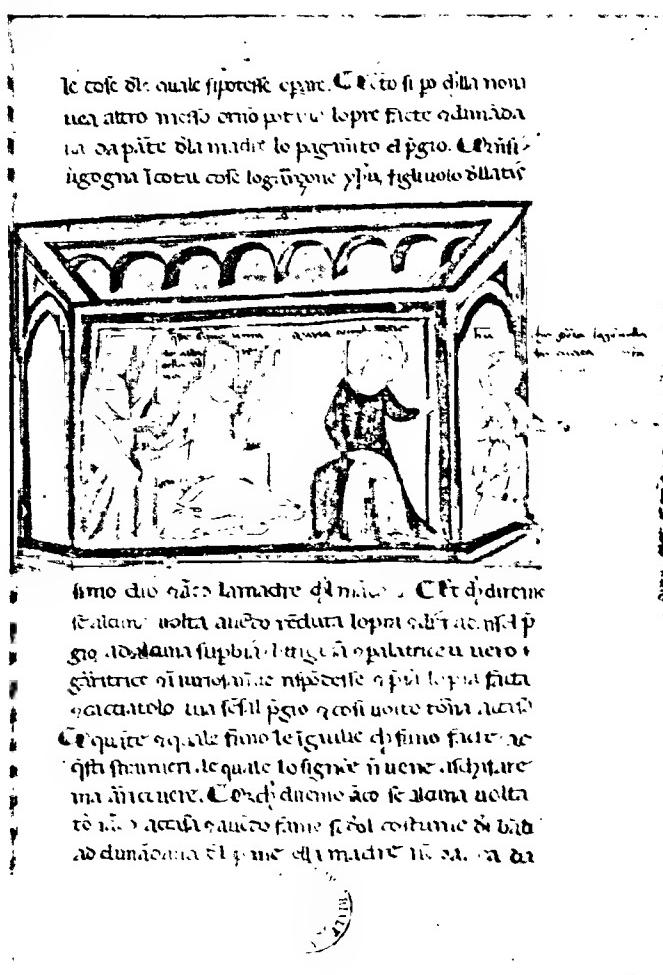


Fig. 6.14: Unknown artists, *Virgin Sewing with Companions*, Tempera and metalpoint on paper, 30.5 x 21.5, Paris Bibliothèque Nationale Ms. ital. 115, folio 41 r.



Fig. 6.15: Unknown artists, *Virgin Circumcising the Christ Child*, Tempera and metalpoint on paper, 30.5 x 21.5 cm, Paris Bibliothèque Nationale Ms. ital. 115, folio 24 v.



Fig. 6.16: Unknown artists, *Circumcision of Christ*, Tempera and gold on parchment, 18 x 12.5 cm, Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame University, 85.25, folio 18 r.

Readers, Media and Materiality

I will now turn to the possible audiences for painted *vita Christi* panels, and how and why they enjoyed great popularity around the turn of the fourteenth century. The related medium of manuscript illumination also helps us to consider how Christ's life became adapted visually for diverse publics in this period. Many of the earliest examples of painted *vita Christi* ensembles bear evidence of use by 'Poor Clares', as Franciscan nuns were called in honor of their founder Clare of Assisi.⁵¹ The Poor Clares seem to have had a long tradition of interest in Christological narrative scenes; many of the early historiated crosses discussed above were made for their convents.⁵² The Trieste panel is documented in a Poor Clare convent from the early fourteenth century, and depicts St Clare at the end of its Christological cycle. Clare is similarly pictured on the Virginia Diptych, indicating a likely convent context for it. A number of other examples of such narrative ensembles have also been connected to Clarissan devotion.⁵³ The *vita Christi* textual tradition likewise emerged first in female Franciscan convents, as exemplified by the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* mentioned earlier, written by a friar for a Franciscan nun. The famous Paris manuscript of

that text, Bibliothèque Nationale Ms. ital. 115, was probably made for Poor Clare readers c. 1350, who are pictured in it alongside the Virgin Mary as though they were her companions (Fig. 6.14).⁵⁴ Early *vita Christi* panels and illustrated *vita Christi* manuscripts such as this indicate that Franciscan nuns were at the forefront of the new devotional practices centred on episodes of Christ's life.

Yet the *vita Christi*, in both word and picture, soon found favour with lay as well as monastic readers. The adaptability of Christ's life as a devotional trope is evidenced by the wide variations in materials, text structures and image programmes seen in illustrated manuscripts of the *Meditationes*. The Paris manuscript, for example, is painted in an unusual washed drawing technique on paper, and features images that constantly interrupt the text, a structure that would prompt the reader to repeatedly visualize it. In its image cycle, the Virgin is repeatedly emphasized as a role model for the reader, as was common in devotional literature written by men for women in the late medieval period. By contrast, another manuscript, made in mid-fourteenth-century Bologna and now in the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame, is painted with gold and rich pigments on fine parchment, and its text-image structure is more traditional, with miniatures placed at the beginning of each chapter. The pictorial cycle also, unusually, emphasizes Joseph, who wears fourteenth century dress and is presented as a model for the probable male, lay reader.⁵⁵ The adaptation of the *Meditationes* for different readers becomes very clear via a comparison of the two

51 Gordon, 'The Virgin and Child', p. 34.

53 Schmidt, *Painted Piety*, pp. 223–26.

52 Derbes, *Picturing the Passion*, p. 170.

54 For this argument regarding Ms. ital. 115 see Flora, 2009.

55 See Phillips, 'The *Meditations*', pp. 237–83.

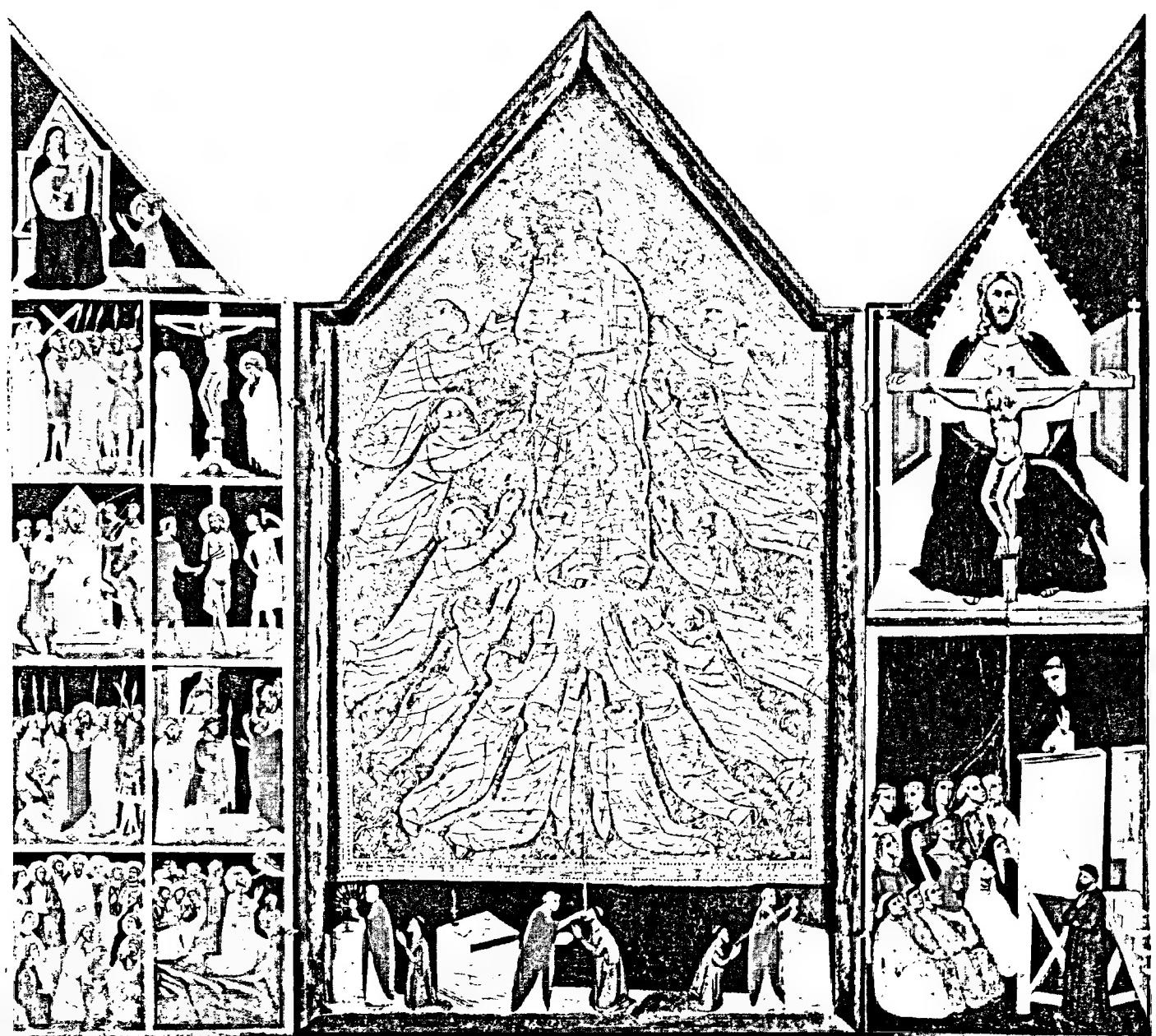


Fig. 6.17: Pacino di Bonaguida, *Chiarito Tabernacle*, Tempera and gold on wood, 101.3 x 113.5, The J. Paul Getty Museum.

manuscripts' rendition of the Circumcision of Christ. In the Paris manuscript, the image follows the unique textual description of how the Virgin Mary circumcises Christ herself (Fig. 6.15). Mary here becomes a performative devotional model for the reader. By contrast, in the Snite manuscript, Joseph holds the child while the circumcision is performed, an assertion of his status as *paterfamilias* that would have resonated with a male lay reader (Fig. 6.16).⁵⁶

As was the case with *vita Christi* texts and manuscripts, variations on *vita Christi* panels could suit different audiences. Or, as was the case with certain devotional books in this period, particularly books of hours, a single object could appeal across ways of life. The Arizona polyptych by Pacino features two supplicants at the foot of the cross—a poor Clare nun and a layman (Fig. 6.12). Their paring hints that these objects could be created for families, perhaps in this case the layperson

56 For a more detailed comparison of these two manuscripts, see Flora, 'Gender, Image, and Devotion', pp. 160–76.

shown provided the object in question for an enclosed relative, or it was placed in a small family chapel in a convent church, where both devotees might have accessed it at different times. Or, a male patron might gift such a work to a female convent, as in the case of another work by Pacino, a multimedia triptych commissioned by the Chiarito del Voglia now in the J. Paul Getty museum featuring a *vita Christi* series on its left wing (Fig. 6.17).⁵⁷ This object presents scenes from Chiarito's own religious life as well, functioning thus as a commemorative as well as a devotional object. These smaller devotional objects provoke additional comparisons with books, for their open-and-shut format offered a kindred interactive and material experience. The Arizona polyptych is comprised of five hinged panels that could be unfolded as the narratives unfold. A viewer of this object could alternately read the stories from Christ's infancy depicted on the panels on the left side before moving to the Passion scenes at right, and finally to the Crucifixion at the center. Like a book, the concealing and revealing of contents in these objects requires the devout person's physical participation; the senses of sight and touch are fully engaged.

The material affinities between manuscripts and painted panels illustrating Christ's life are exemplified by a manuscript now in the Morgan Library painted c. 1320 (Fig. 6.18), also by Pacino di Bonaguida. The Morgan manuscript is a painted *vita Christi* on parchment. In this case, the owner was likely a member of the Franciscan Third Order, in which laypeople participated in a more limited way in the religious life observed by the friars and Clares. It contains no words—instead, images from Christ's life replace the text, with each opening effectively becoming a painted diptych.⁵⁸ Such objects were nonetheless designed to be 'read', particularly because medieval concepts of reading involved an oral, aural, performative mode of participation not strictly tied to the viewing of words.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, that doesn't mean these objects were designed for illiterate devotees. Vernacular literacy was on the rise in the early fourteenth century, particularly among those of a certain social standing who could afford to commission works of art. Both the Snite and Paris manuscripts are written in local Italian dialects, and there is growing evidence that some nuns, who came mostly from the upper classes, could read Latin. An illustrated copy of the *Meditationes* now in Oxford, made c. 1350, shows evidence of convent patronage, and contains the Latin version of that text (Fig. 6.19). So, we can no longer think of painted *vita Christi* ensembles, as past scholarship almost always has, as illustrations of or replacements for texts.⁶⁰ Although

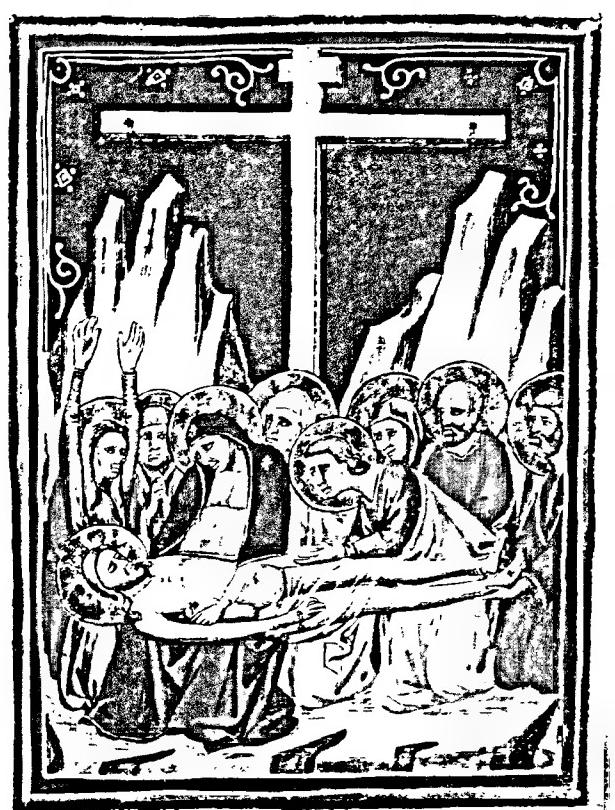


Fig. 6.18: Pacino di Bonaguida, *Vita Christi* Manuscript, Tempera and gold on parchment, 24.5 x 17.6 cm, The Morgan Library and Museum.

57 On this triptych see Lakey, 'The Curious Case', pp. 13–30, and discussions of the triptych throughout the Getty catalogue, Los Angeles and Toronto.

58 This manuscript contains a cycle of images illustrating the life of Gerard of Villamagna, a local saint venerated particularly by Franciscans, indicating likely patronage by a Franciscan lay

brother. See New York, *Painting and Illumination*, as well as Los Angeles and Toronto.

59 For discussions of reading in the medieval period see Camille, 'Seeing and Reading', pp. 26–49.

60 Flora, 'A Book', pp. 61–85.

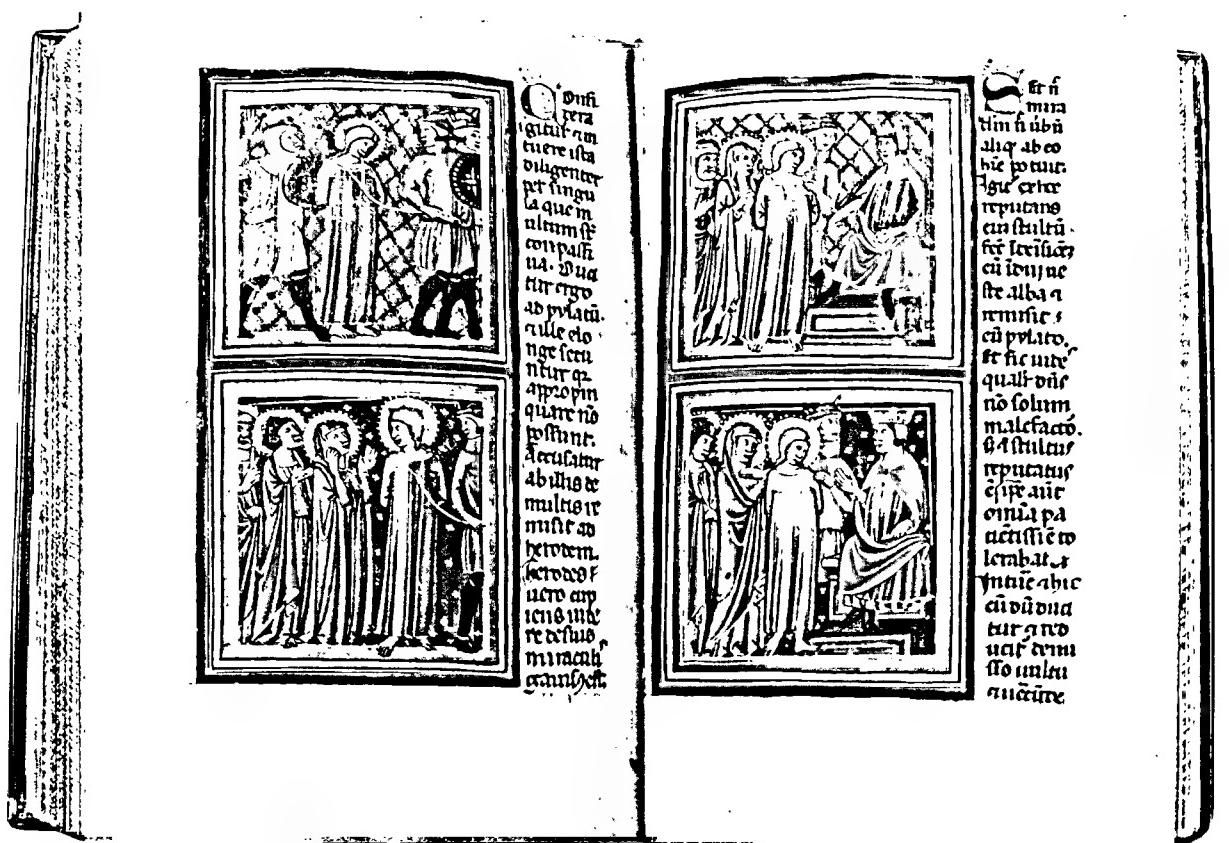


Fig. 6.19: Unknown artists, *Passion Scenes*, Tempera and gold on parchment, 24.8 x 15.8 cm, MS 410, folios 130 v and 131 r, Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford.

the parallel textual tradition helps us to understand how these objects functioned in devotional practices, *vita Christi* ensembles offered their own complex discourses on Christological narratives. As I will explain further in a moment, reading serial images of Christ's life could be a demanding exercise requiring much of the viewer, just as a text would demand certain skills of its readers. These objects would have facilitated what Margaret Aston called 'devotional literacy', that is, the ability to recognize sacred events and to interpret and appropriate them.⁶¹

Reading the Visual *Vita Christi*

Cimabue's painted *vita Christi* and other objects like it offered a spectrum of devotional possibilities for viewers. Two case studies offer insight as to the potential reading strategies implicated in such painted ensembles. First, I want to take a close look at the diptych now in Virginia (Fig. 6.12). Because its individual scenes are close in size to the Frick and National Gallery panels, Cimabue's *vita Christi* may have taken a similar form. The image of Clare of Assisi along with that of Francis suggest that it may have been intended for a Poor Clare devotee, so we can speculate as to how she may have approached the life of Christ as it is interpreted here. The diptych presents a selection of stories from Christ's life that at first seem to be presented in sequential order, but the arrangement is in fact much more complex. The series begins at the upper left, with the scene of Christ's Nativity. Looking to the scene to the immediate right, the viewer skips over thirty-three years of Christ's life,

⁶¹ Aston, 'Devotional Literacy', pp. 101–34.

including his entire adult ministry, arriving at the Last Supper at the dramatic moment in which Judas reaches for the cup at the centre of the table, signaling his impending betrayal. The reader is then immediately transported to that betrayal in the scene facing this one on the right panel. Via this montage of Judas' actions, time and space are collapsed.⁶² The narrative then progresses to the end result of Judas' treachery, arriving at the Crucifixion itself. At the cross, multiple stories are layered within the story. The reactions of the onlookers—the swooning Virgin at left, the distraught John at right, the centurion who converts behind him, even the weeping angels at the top—condense multiple dramatic moments into a single view.

This arrangement of scenes facilitates the viewer's mental movement through the work of art as in the rhetorical concept of *ductus*, as elucidated by Mary Carruthers.⁶³ Experiencing narrative becomes a journey through time and space, with stopping off points along the way. Thus, after pausing to envision the ultimate drama of the crucifixion, the viewer proceeds to the lower register at left, where a series of two key moments after Christ's death offer potential points at which to pause one's meditational journey. At left, Christ's body is removed from the cross, and at right, the change of landscape signals the movement from Calvary to his tomb. Such changes in scenery would also recall liturgical plays, which were especially popular, as now, in celebration of Easter. These two places—Calvary and the Tomb—are also enshrined in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Franciscans had an active presence in the Holy Land from the very early days of the order, and were eventually made official custodians of the Christian pilgrimage sites.⁶⁴ The inclusion of these scenes, as well as that of the Nativity, the cave of which was also a pilgrimage stop, might also encourage the viewer to make a mental pilgrimage, the only kind of pilgrimage a strictly enclosed Franciscan nun could undertake.

The Deposition and Lamentation scenes here are also linked via the repeated image of the mourning Virgin. She cradles her son's head as he is taken down off the cross and again as he is placed in the tomb. Versions of what would later become the iconic image of the pietà, these images foreground Mary's sorrow. Such an emphasis on Mary's reaction is important, for moving mentally through the stories of Christ's life meant being moved emotionally as well. A fundamental concern of the *vita Christi* genre was the cultivation of the affect, the ability not only to envision but also to empathetically participate in Christ's life. A viewer would contemplate Mary's motherhood via these two scenes, perhaps also pausing to look back at the top left scene of Christ's Nativity to note that the form of the stone manger the swaddled Christ child is wrapped in foreshadows the sarcophagus into which he is later interred.

Crossing again to the right panel, the viewer makes a larger leap in time, now seeing the resurrected Christ, his wounds on display, hovering in a mandorla accompanied by angels. A trail of fire, the trumpeting angel, and the open scroll held by another angel indicate that this is an Apocalyptic Christ who has returned at the end of time. The viewer has to make an emotional turn here; Christ's weakness and death so poignantly portrayed in the former two scenes is now completely reversed in this image of Christ's ultimate triumph. By pairing opposing stories, here using *antithesis*, another rhetorical strategy seen in ancient and medieval texts, the artists underline the ultimate teleology of Christ's suffering.⁶⁵ The Apocalyptic Christ also serves as a bridge to the following scene, which features an icon-like presentation of St Francis, the Virgin and Child, and Clare of Assisi. At first these episodes might seem unrelated—particularly since this image defies the sequential presentation used in the diptych thus far. However, Franciscan eschatology of the thirteenth century, taking cues from the condemned prophesies of Joachim of Fiore, read the Apocalypse in terms of the Order's history. As discussed in Chapter 2, Bonaventure and other

⁶² For a discussion of a similar elision of scenes and their relationship to a moving viewer in the context of sculpture see Jung, 'Moving Viewers', pp. 23–44.

⁶³ Carruthers, 'The Concept of Ductus', pp. 190–213.

⁶⁴ Moore, *The Architecture*, pp. 133–60.

⁶⁵ Derbes and Sandona, 'The Usurer's Heart', chapter 3.

commentators declared Francis to be the Angel of the Sixth Seal of Revelation. Francis' life and the rise of the mendicant orders therefore signaled that Christ's second coming would happen soon. The pairing of Francis' image with that of the Apocalyptic Christ on the diptych might therefore prompt a devout viewer to see her own time as part of the continuum of salvation history.

The Trieste *vita Christi* (Fig. 6.1) offers a more elaborately detailed vision of Christ's life that might likewise be read in multivalent ways. The triptych remains very much understudied, despite its excellent state of preservation and clear provenance from the Clarissan convent of San Cipriano, founded in 1278 in Trieste.⁶⁶ The central panel of what is now displayed as a triptych (its wings added a bit later in the fourteenth century), is attributed to an unknown Venetian artist, sometimes called the 'Master of Santa Chiara', dated to c. 1300, and contains thirty-six scenes from the Life of Christ. Each scene is accompanied by an inscription in Latin painted in red, describing the story depicted. Here, then, the relationship between text and image is extremely close, recalling an illustrated manuscript or a cycle of frescoes explicated via *tituli*. The narratives read from left to right, top to bottom. On the top register, Christ's infancy is shown via the stories of the Annunciation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, Presentation in the Temple, Flight into Egypt, and Massacre of the Innocents. Christ Among the Doctors begins the second register, and then the story shifts to the adult ministry of Christ, with scenes of his Baptism, two vignettes illustrating the Wedding at Cana, two scenes of the Temptation (the first of which is a two in one). The third register contains scenes from Christ's ministry with a particular emphasis on his healing miracles. These are Christ and the Samaritan Woman, the Healing of the Paralytic, the Healing of the Demon Possessed Man, the Healing of the Man Born Blind, the Healing of the Ten Lepers, and the Transfiguration. On the following register, Christ's final and most prophetic healing miracle, the Raising of Lazarus, inaugurates a Passion series including the Entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, Washing the Disciples' Feet, Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the Betrayal of Christ. The fifth register contains six Passion narratives: Christ before Pilate, the Flagellation, the Way to Calvary, Veronica's Veil, the Crucifixion, and the Lamentation. The final register shows the Resurrection, the Three Marys at Tomb, the Ascension of Christ, the Death of the Virgin, the Death of Clare of Assisi, and Francis Receiving the Stigmata.

Viewing the Trieste panel, a Clarissan viewer could move through the sequence chronologically, but like the Virginia diptych, the narrative presentation defies a strictly linear reading. At first the narratives seem to follow the church calendar, with the Annunciation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi and Presentation at the Temple—all major feasts—inaugurating the series. However, by following the sequence, the viewer seems to weave in and out of more standard narratives into more elaborate takes on traditional storylines. For example, the Wedding at Cana, shown in the second register, is, unusually, elaborated in two different scenes. The first shows Christ and Mary at the wedding banquet, and depicts the moment in which, according to the Gospel narrative, Mary intervenes on behalf of the embarrassed hosts, telling her son that they have already run out of wine. At the panel's right, the viewer witnesses this exchange between Christ and his mother, and then in the following panel, the actual miracle is depicted, as Christ, hand raised in a gesture of blessing, transforms the water into wine as a servant pours it into the amphorae. Occupying a prominent, central position on the panel, these paired scenes offered a viewer the chance not only to consider this first miracle of Christ's, but to note his mother's role in its execution. The general Franciscan devotion to Mary has been discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4, but she served as a particularly important role model for female Franciscans. As recent studies of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* have noted, in that text Mary's role in the Wedding at Cana is interpreted for a Clarissan audience, marking Mary as a model of service and piety.⁶⁷ Christ's creation of wine out of water also conneded the wine of the Eucharist, foreshadowing of his sacrificial death.⁶⁸ Mary, who aids in

⁶⁶ On this triptych see d'Arcis, 'Il Trittico', pp. 353–77; Travi, 'Il maestro', pp. 81–96.

⁶⁷ See Flora, *Devout Belief*, chapter 4.

⁶⁸ See also the discussion of Franciscan images of the Wedding at Cana in Neff, 'The Humble Man's Wedding', pp. 292–323.

the provision of this symbolic beverage, performs an act of charity akin to her provision of Christ's body and blood.

Moving to the third register below, the viewer becomes immersed in an unusual series depicting episodes from Christ's ministry. The first on this register is Christ and the Samaritan Woman, a narrative that receives extended treatment in the *Meditationes* and has thus been connected specifically to Clarissan devotion. Perhaps emboldened through meditation on this story of Christ's mercy shown to a seemingly hopeless female sinner—an adulteress, no less—the viewer would then contemplate four miracle stories that follow. Selected from the large number of healing miracles in the Gospels, these four stories address various aspects of healing. Two dramatic accounts of physical healing are the stories of the paralytic and the ten lepers. Yet the two other accounts chosen emphasized both spiritual and physical cures. The demon-possessed men have their souls effectively restored to them, while the sight given to the man born blind shows that Christ has the power to reveal the truth, as mentioned in the discussion of the centurion Longinus in Chapter 2.

The viewer then moves into an extended Passion cycle inserted into the next two registers. The concentrated emphasis on Christ's suffering is in line with the Franciscan promotion of episodic meditation on Christ's Passion. Although most of the Passion scenes selected here are standard ones, the designer of the panel offers yet another unusual twist in the fifth register, where two related images, the Way to Calvary and the Veronica, form a pair in the centre. The Passion narrative series is interrupted by the insertion of a close-up image of the Veronica, a depiction of Christ's face on a white cloth that fills the entire pictorial field. Tradition held that a woman approached Jesus on the road to Calvary and, moved with pity, offered her veil to wipe the blood and sweat from his face. According to legend, this cloth was miraculously imprinted with the face of Christ, thus was an *acheiropoieton*, that is, an image made without human hands.⁶⁹ As mentioned in Chapter 5, the *sudarium* or sweat-cloth, also became known as the Veronica or 'vera' (true) icon, the name also given to the woman who provided the veil. Veneration of a relic thought to be this cloth is noted in Rome from at least the thirteenth century. Pope Innocent III, who also approved the Rule of Saint Francis, established an official cult of the Veronica by offering indulgences to those who venerated it. By the time of the painting of the Trieste panel, the Veronica was widely venerated in Saint Peter's, proudly displayed as one of the key pilgrimage stops in the Roman Jubilee of 1300.⁷⁰ Even if the Clarissan viewers who prayed before the Trieste panel never saw the relic itself in person, its presence in the midst of the Passion series offered a 'station of contemplation', to borrow Hans Belting's term.⁷¹ This would be a point for the viewer to pause and consider the tortured visage of Christ as he faced death, perhaps even imagining herself as the woman on the road who offered her care and sympathy.

Veronica herself is not represented on the panel, but as the viewer moves to the following scene of the Crucifixion, the women who witness Christ's crucifixion are prominently shown. The Virgin is swooning, as she often is at the cross, her fainting posture in this case almost exactly mirroring the distended body of Christ.⁷² A Lamentation scene follows, where Mary cradles the head of her dead son as others look on in despair. Here, a distraught Mary holds her dead son on her lap in an image that might call to mind the images of her holding her infant son. Mary's devotion to her son even after his death was also praised. According to the *Legenda aurea*:

As long as [Mary] lived, she diligently and devoutly visited all the places sacred to the memory of her Son—where he had been baptized, had fasted, had prayed, had suffered, died, and been buried, had risen and ascended into heaven.⁷³

⁶⁹ Kessler, 'Spiritual Seeing', pp. 12–14, and Wolf, 'From Mandylion', pp. 153.

⁷⁰ Kessler and Zacharias, pp. 188, 211–12.

⁷¹ Belting, *The Image and its Public*, p. 232.

⁷² On the iconography of the swooning Virgin, see Neff, 'The Pain of Compassio', pp. 254–73.

⁷³ Jacobus of Voragine, trans. Ryan, pp. 77–78.

Although the Virgin's pilgrimage as described here appears to be a literal pilgrimage, Voragine is also probably referring to mental pilgrimage, the idea that meditations could transport a pious person to the places and events in Christ's life. By looking at images such as those on the Trieste panel, a devout person was likewise encouraged to visit the holy sites and events again and again in her mind's eye, following the Virgin's example. Both the image of the Veronica, with its reference to an actual relic, as well as the sites of the Holy Land embedded within the Christological narratives, would encourage mental movement both through time, via the events of the past, and the spaces and places where those events took place. The viewer would also move in and out of different emotional states in such a meditational journey; this section of the panel, dedicated to the most tragic portions of Christ's story, would lead her to the deepest point of empathetic contemplation.

In the final register on the panel, the message turns more hopeful, as scenes of Christ's Resurrection and Ascension lead to depictions of the peaceful deaths of the Virgin Mary and Clare of Assisi, as well as Francis Receiving the Stigmata. As in the final scene of the Virginia diptych, Christological narratives connect directly to the Franciscans. The pairing of the death of the Virgin with the death of Clare allows for a direct connection between these two holy virgins that echoes the links between them made in devotional literature, including the *Meditationes*, as well as Thomas of Celano's biography of Clare. As Celano tells us, Mary visited Clare on her deathbed and draped a cloth of honor over her body.⁷⁴ On the Trieste panel, Mary cradles a tiny baby-like image of Clare's soul, exactly as Christ does for Mary in the preceding episode. Finally, the image of Francis receiving the stigmata reminds the viewer of his close affinities to Christ in his Passion. Indeed, the final two scenes on the lower register pair nicely with the two scenes directly above them. The Virgin's participation in Clare's death recalls her presence at her son's death and its aftermath, and Francis' stigmatization likewise recalls Christ's suffering. Reading the images diagonally as well as laterally, the connections between these scenes become even stronger; the stigmatization of Francis is presented diagonally to the Crucifixion, and the Lamentation can be read in terms of the death of Clare to the diagonal below it.

The sequences of narrative scenes in these ensembles call to mind techniques used in film, and indeed such arrangements in manuscripts have been termed 'cinematic'.⁷⁵ Far from a straightforward series, the Christological episodes are arranged in a way akin to that of montage, in which the joining or breaking of narratives allows the filmmaker to craft his or her own version of the narrative and lead the viewer, manipulating his or her chronological and emotional movement through the story.⁷⁶ The bricolage of scenes on the Virginia diptych and the Trieste triptych suggests that Christ's life could be edited in ways that encouraged a range of readings, allowing for affective experiences as well as exegetical interpretations, even within the same work. Narratives did not need to be understood in sequential order; indeed, as medieval treatises on the art of memory underscore, inviting multiple associations made sacred stories more memorable.⁷⁷ When viewing religious images, a devotee might also draw upon what Lina Bolzoni has called a 'web' of mental images and allusions stored in the memory, stemming from sermons, texts, liturgical drama, and other works of art.⁷⁸ As Donal Cooper and Janet Robson argued for fresco cycles as well, narrative images could also be read in terms of other nearby images placed opposite or diagonally in relationship to them.⁷⁹ A painted *vita Christi* opened the door to a range of contemplative associations.

⁷⁴ Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Clare*, pp. 316–17.

⁷⁵ See for example the discussion of montage as it relates to narrative scenes in a medieval manuscript in Sheingorn and Desmond, *Myth, Montage*, pp. 25–45.

⁷⁶ In his classic study on the concept of montage, S. M. Eisenstein remarks that montage demands creative participation on the part of the spectator. See Eisenstein,

Towards a Theory of Montage, p. 311.

⁷⁷ William Cook also argues that the same is true for early *vita* panels of Francis. See Cook, 'Introduction', p. 9.

⁷⁸ See Bolzoni, *The Web of Images*, introduction.

⁷⁹ See for example Cooper and Robson, *The Making of Assisi*, p. 190.

We have no written documentation as to how and why the various scenes on these objects were selected and by whom—for instance whether the person who would ultimately be viewing the object purchased it, or whether a commission might be mediated via a procurator, as was the case for female convents. Yet, in thinking of these narrative ensembles as a devotional form related to the textual *vita Christi*, it follows that the viewer would have considerable agency in their interpretation. This is where these static images differ from the moving images in film. The author of the *Meditationes*, for example, maps out the life of Christ in his text, but leaves his reader the freedom to use it in multiple ways. In his prologue he states,

'For we can meditate on divine Scripture, explain it, and understand it in multifarious ways, insofar as we believe it useful; provided it not be contrary to the truth about his life, or justice, or doctrine.'⁸⁰

The *Meditationes* author also recommends that the reader focus on the narrative moments of Christ's life, and only refer to the moralizing passages he includes when needed.⁸¹ This kind of flexibility of use is echoed in the way devotional treatises, sermons, and other texts were often bound together in a single manuscript that provided a wide menu of options for contemplation.⁸² The painted *vita Christi* might thus be thought of similarly, as a collection of moments for the viewer to choose as needed.

Experiencing Cimabue's *Vita Christi*

Thinking about the multivalent ways one might read a painted *vita Christi* enables us to reconsider the Frick and National Gallery panels by Cimabue (Figs 6.2 and 6.3). Technical evidence shows that the two were not placed next to one another in the original work. The upper and lower edges of each panel are barbed, bearing evidence of a frame originally placed on those outer edges.⁸³ The National Gallery painting came from the upper left corner of a panel, while the Flagellation was placed at the lower right of a panel, and it is unclear whether these were on the same panel or different panels as on a diptych. At first glance, the two Cimabue panels seem to be telling opposing stories: one of glory and beauty, the other of vulnerability and violence. The central figure on the National Gallery panel is a woman regally adorned in a lapis blue robe. She sits on an intricately carved wooden throne, attended by angels dressed in tunics trimmed in rich embroidery and delicate pearls. On her lap, she holds a curly-headed baby, whose soft-fleshed arms reach toward her outstretched hand.

By contrast, the focus of attention on the Frick panel is a thin, nearly naked man tied to a marble column. Instead of angels waiting on him, this man is flanked by two figures beating him with whips. Turned to face him, each flagellator has one arm stretched out to hold him, presumably to intensify the blows thrown by the other, raised arm wielding the instruments of torture. This scene takes place not at the heavenly court, but in the earthly reality of a public square, as the very medieval, Italian towers (which would have appeared modern to viewers in Cimabue's day) attest. What meaning could these two images have had as part of the same work? As we have seen, scenes from a *vita Christi* did not have to be understood in sequential order. Despite their fragmentary state, the two Cimabue panels can therefore be read in relation to each other and to the wider 'web' of Christian experiences such as images, texts, sermons, liturgy, liturgical drama, and pilgrimage. I would also like to suggest that Cimabue's *vita Christi* was

⁸⁰ John of Caulibus, *Meditations*, p. 4.

⁸¹ John of Caulibus, *Meditations*, p. 332.

⁸² See Neff, *The Supplications*, for an example of an illustrated manuscript that is a devotional compendium.

⁸³ Flora, *Cimabue*.

intended for Franciscan viewers, possibly nuns, as we have seen with many of the other early *vita Christi* ensembles.

The viewer probably began her reading of Cimabue's *vita Christi* with the Virgin and Child, which was located at the top left corner of the original work. The iconography of the *Virgin and Child* recalls that of a Byzantine icon. In addition to the theme of the enthroned Madonna, Byzantine influence in this work can be seen in the panel's icon-like gold ground and the costumes of the angels, which are similar to those seen in Byzantine art.⁸⁴ With her open hand gesturing toward the Christ Child, her pose is akin to that of a type of icon commonly referred to as the *Hodegetria*, the one who shows or points to 'the way', that is, Christ, the way to salvation.⁸⁵ By the time Cimabue was painting, the enthroned Virgin and Child had become a common iconographic theme both in Eastern and Western Christianity, as discussed in Chapter 4. As the mother of God, she was given quasi-divine status as co-ruler with Christ, queen of the celestial court. A throne, the actual seat of the bishop, was the centrepiece of every Christian cathedral in the West, and thus the image of the enthroned Madonna is a symbol of the church. The throne also recalls the throne of King Solomon, and it connotes not only Mary's (and thus the church's) divine wisdom but also her lineage as heir to the house of David and the great kings of the Hebrew tradition. Mary was also praised for her relationship to her son. She was seen as the prime intercessor; as the closest human being to Christ, she had the power to mediate between the prayers of the saints and the faithful to her son, asking him to consider their prayers. Her special intimacy with Christ was emphasized in devotional literature written during Cimabue's lifetime and in the next generation. The most important witness to Christ's life, she was the figure Christians were told to imitate while participating in the imaginative, meditative prayer that the Franciscans and Dominicans especially encouraged.⁸⁶

The popularity of monumental enthroned Madonnas testifies to this point, as discussed in Chapter 4, and to a certain degree, the Virgin and Child can be understood as a miniature version of these. As Victor Schmidt has suggested, the mendicant orders, often the primary commissioners of large-scale Madonnas, also seem to have influenced the production of smaller versions to be used in personal devotion.⁸⁷ Accordingly, in the National Gallery panel, Cimabue has adapted this monumental theme in order to connect his image more intimately to its audience. The Virgin points to the Christ Child, a gesture that would encourage meditation on him as the divine Incarnate. Christ's gesture of baby-like affection and his glance at his mother place equal emphasis on his humanity and turn him from the imposing, blessing infant seen more typically in large-scale representations to the approachable, sweet child described in devotional literature.⁸⁸ With only two angels and without the presence of other saints, such as those in the Magdalen Master and Pacino panels, the viewer has a private audience at the heavenly court. The angels and Mary look directly at the viewer, and the angel at right draws attention to the diaphanous cloth Mary sits on. Transparent and trimmed in embroidery, this cloth recalls another monumental work painted by Cimabue. The loincloth in his large crucifix made for the Franciscan church of Santa Croce is made of a similarly translucent fabric (Fig. 6.20). As discussed in Chapter 5, Cimabue's nearly nude Christ, one of the first images of its kind in the West, echoes Franciscan tropes connecting nakedness with the pious poverty St Francis emphasized. This idea is expressed in a key narrative in Francis' own biography.

Born the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Francis publicly disrobed as he renounced his inheritance and proclaimed his devotion to apostolic poverty. The episode is illustrated in one

⁸⁴ The costumes of the angels are akin to Byzantine imperial dress. See Ball, *Byzantine Dress*, p. 18.

⁸⁵ For the iconography of the enthroned Hodegetria, see Lazarev, *Studies in Byzantine Painting*, pp. 232–48.

⁸⁶ On Mary as a patron of the Franciscan Order, see discussions in Chapters 3 and 4.

⁸⁷ For the relationship of large-scale images of the enthroned Madonna to their smaller counterparts, see Schmidt, *Painted Piety*, pp. 169–204. One of the points he underscores is that the mendicant orders, often the primary commissioners of large-scale Madonnas, also seem to have influenced the production of smaller versions, to be used by monastic and Tertiary audiences.

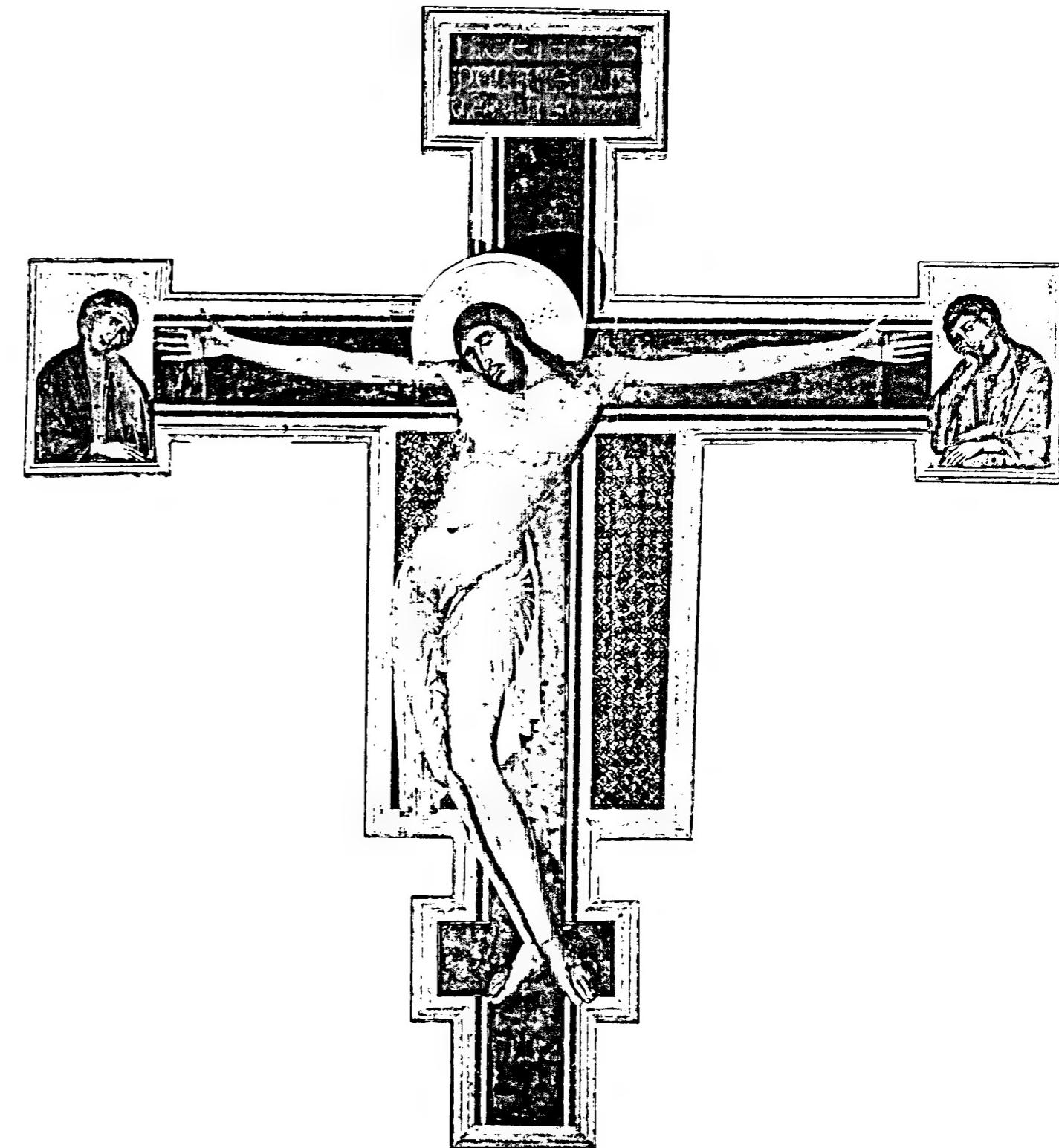


Fig. 6.20: Cimabue, *Crucifix*, (prior to 1966 flood), Tempera and gold on wood, 448 cm x 390 cm, Santa Croce, Florence.



Fig. 6.21: Saint Francis Master or Giotto, *Francis Renounces His Father*, Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi.

of the nave frescoes illustrating Francis' life in the Upper Church at Assisi, where the local bishop covers his nakedness (Fig. 6.21). In emphasizing Christ's nudity as an emblem of his poverty, as in Cimabue's Santa Croce crucifix, the Franciscans strengthened the typological connection of Francis to Christ. A Franciscan viewer might therefore understand the transparent cloth in the National Gallery panel as a reference to Francis. A devotee might further contemplate this cloth in terms of Mary's role as provider of Christ's clothing.⁸⁹ The *Meditationes* also relates that Mary covered her naked son with a loin cloth just before his crucifixion, an episode illustrated in the Oxford manuscript, as discussed in Chapter 5 (Fig. 6.22). The theme of clothing also connects the two Cimabue panels, for Christ wears a transparent loin cloth on the Frick *Flagellation* that recalls the cloth signaled by the angel in the National Gallery panel. The two images, even if viewed at opposite ends of a narrative series, connote Christ's future sacrificial death as well as Franciscan poverty.

Unlike the iconic theme of the enthroned Virgin and Child, the story of Christ's Flagellation is derived from the biblical account of his Passion.⁹⁰ On the original work, it was placed at the lower right corner of a panel, likely following other Passion scenes. It could nonetheless be contemplated on its own as a stopping point in the process of *ductus*. The *Meditationes* text gives us a sense of how a reader might ruminate on this moment. The author describes the *Flagellation* in excruciating detail, urging his reader to imagine herself watching it:

A young man, elegant and modest, handsome in appearance beyond the sons of men stands naked in front of everybody ... From all parts of his body the royal blood flows everywhere; bruise upon bruise, cut upon cut is laid on, given again, and accelerated; until finally when not only the torturers but the onlookers as well were utterly exhausted, he is ordered untied. As we are told in the History, the column to which he was tied shows the blood stains even today. Now at this point regard him lovingly for a long while, and if you do not feel compassion for him here, know that your heart is a heart of stone.⁹¹

⁸⁸ It should be noted that this type of tender gesture is not unheard of in large-scale enthroned Madonnas; for example, in Cimabue's Madonna from Santa Maria dei Servi in Bologna, the Christ Child reaches for his mother's face. In his study of large versus small paintings of the Madonna, Schmidt does not discern a consistent iconographic or formal difference. See Schmidt, *Painted Piety*, pp. 183–89.

⁸⁹ See discussion in Chapter 5, as well as in Flora, 2017.

⁹⁰ The flagellation of Christ is described very briefly in all four gospels. Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15, Luke 23:26, and John 19:1.

⁹¹ John of Caulibus, *Meditations*, p. 247.

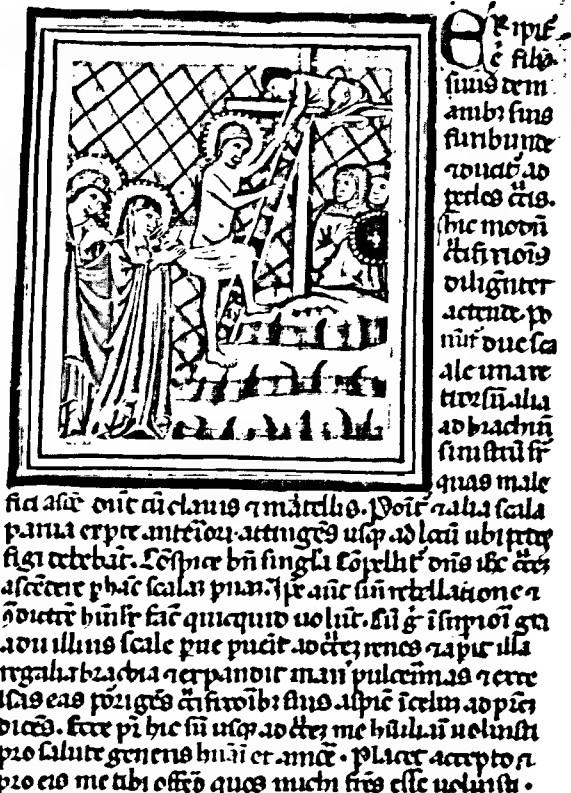


Fig. 6.22: Unknown artists, *Christ Ascending the Cross*, Tempera and gold on parchment, 24.8 x 15.8 cm, MS 410, folio 135v, Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford.

In describing Christ's flagellation, the *Meditationes* author demands that his reader respond with empathy; indeed he even admonishes her if she does not react emotionally, saying that she has a heart of stone. In the text cited above, Christ's innocence, and his nobility, as an 'elegant and modest' young man, are contrasted with the 'foulest of men' beating him. Cimabue conveys a like sense of contrast between the character of Christ and of those who torture him. In the Frick panel, the uncouth nature of the flagellators is made obvious by their presentation in profile, a pose often used to indicate a mistrustful or deceitful individual. The dress of the flagellators is likewise that of men with no decorum, particularly the flagellant at right, who has tucked his tunic into his belt and allowed his hose to sag down. The flagellators' act of reaching toward Christ also heightens the sense of their rudeness; their uninvited touch, intended to inflict pain, is antithetical to the natural, loving touch exchanged between the Christ Child and his mother in the National Gallery panel.

The *Meditationes* author cites the description of the relic of the blood-stained column of the Flagellation in Jerusalem, and Cimabue's unusual attention to the column in his Flagellation may be a reference to this relic. He carefully imitates in paint this pillar's mineral-flecked purple stone, or porphyry. Christ is tied behind it, rather than in front as is often the case in Flagellation iconography, and the column becomes the foremost object in the picture plane. Focusing on the column, a viewer could think beyond the biblical narrative to the meaning of the relic in her own age—again as a possible means to a mental pilgrimage and a reference to the Franciscan presence in the Holy Land. In his Flagellation, Cimabue uses an innovative compositional strategy, seen also in his mural cycle at Assisi, that would likewise help a viewer imaginatively bridge the gap between this moment of sacred history and her own space and time. Cimabue reverses the diagonals of the towers framing the scene, effectively projecting the figures of Christ and his torturers forward, an effect heightened by the position of the wall between the towers and the figures in the foreground of the scene. A further reference to religious experience in Cimabue's day in the Flagellation panel is in the act of flagellation itself. In the thirteenth century in Italy bands of men and boys began practicing public self-flagellation as a form of penance. These groups, known as *disciplinati* or *battuti*, were a highly visible part of the spiritual landscape at the time Cimabue was painting. Taking experiential prayer to the extreme, these groups communed with Christ by emulating the flagellation.⁹² Accounts of the activities of these communities state that they used the right hand to hold the scourge to strike the left shoulder, where Christ carried the cross.⁹³ The references to contemporary life that Cimabue includes, such as those to flagellant movements and the architecture, would have helped any prayerful person to feel as though he or she were a firsthand witness to this event.

Although vastly different in emotional tenor, both Cimabue panels emphasize Christ's humanity, a central theme in the spirituality of the Franciscans in particular. While the humanity of Christ is an object of joy and tenderness in the National Gallery panel, in the Frick panel his human nature is a liability, making him vulnerable, capable of experiencing deep human suffering and sorrow. In literature and art, the Franciscans emphasized the stories of Christ's infancy and his Passion above those of his adult ministry. The fact that the lost Cimabue work contained at least one scene each from Christ's Infancy and Passion points toward Franciscan patronage. We do not have enough pieces of the puzzle, so to speak, to definitively claim that the Poor Clares were the intended viewers of Cimabue's *vita Christi*, but the fact that this object was among the earliest of its kind, and that the Clares were at the forefront of the devotional trends focused on meditation on Christ's life, makes them likely candidates.

Following a suggestion from Miklós Boskovits, Dillian Gordon suggested that the original

⁹² The image of the Flagellation of Christ was frequently used on banners and other works of art commissioned by these groups, a fact that led Meyer Schapiro to speculate that the Frick panel had also been made for such a company. The discovery of the National Gallery panel calls that suggestion

into question, however, since the lost Cimabue work must have included many other scenes from the life of Christ. See Schapiro, 'On the Italian Painting', pp. 29–53.

⁹³ Dickson, 'The Flagellants', p. 241.

Cimabue work may have taken the form of a diptych painted circa 1320 by the Florentine artist known as the Master of San Martino alla Palma. This work, as Boskovits argued, was originally composed of panels now dispersed among several collections.⁹⁴ The individual scenes are close in size to the Frick and National Gallery panels, and the diptych featured both the subjects of the Virgin and Child Enthroned and the Flagellation. Gordon tentatively suggested that the Cimabue work perhaps served as a model for this later diptych. The San Martino alla Palma diptych also included an image of Saint Francis and Saint Clare of Assisi, pointing to female Franciscan patronage; it stands to reason that the lost Cimabue work could also have been made for the Poor Clares.⁹⁵

Cimabue's partially recovered *vita Christi* thus helps us to reassess the role of women in the cultural and artistic changes for which the period is celebrated. The devotion to the *vita Christi* that developed first in convent contexts of the late thirteenth century provoked a new widespread interest in painted Christological narratives, as seen in watershed works of the early fourteenth century. One of these is Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua of c. 1306, with its emotionally charged focus on Christ's life and Passion commissioned by a wealthy layman; another is Duccio's Maestà of 1311, made for the high altar of Siena Cathedral, heralded as an early example of a complex, multi-paneled altarpiece. The Maestà features a painted *vita Christi* on its reverse, an expansively elaborated Passion series that was accessible to a general public.⁹⁶ Female Franciscan practices of piety thus influenced new developments in narrative imagery of the period, and Cimabue played a role in that process. The discovery that the Virgin and Child was part of the same ensemble as the Flagellation reveals that Cimabue was an innovator in the field of smaller scale devotional art as well as in monumental painting. Understanding Cimabue's oeuvre anew, we can better comprehend the myriad ways that the life of Christ was pictured and imagined in late medieval Italy.

⁹⁴ On this reconstructed diptych, see Flora, *Cimabue*, p. 27, and Boskovits, *Frihe italienische*, pp. 128–31.

⁹⁵ For suggestions that the Cimabue ensemble was made for the Poor Clares, see Gordon, 'The Virgin and Child' and Flora, *Cimabue*, pp. 27–28.

⁹⁶ For a discussion of the relationship between smaller

painted panels featuring Life of Christ cycles and the Maestà, see Seiler, 'Duccio's Maestà', pp. 258–77, who argues that private devotional practices related to the Life of Christ influenced the format of Duccio's famous altarpiece. For the idea that the laity could view the reverse of the altarpiece, see Israëlis, 'An Angel', p. 130.



EPILOGUE

Last Transformations in Pisa

We know very little about Cimabue's work during the last decade or so of his life. His activity from the 1280s, when his Santa Croce Crucifix, San Francesco Madonna, and *vita Christi* ensemble were probably made, until the end of the century is undocumented, and no works attributed to him datable to this period exist. In contrast to the dearth of written records accounting for Cimabue's earlier career, however, documents survive attesting to two works commissioned by Pisan patrons at the dawn of the fourteenth century. Notices survive for the mosaic of Saint John the Evangelist in the apse of Pisa Cathedral, a project Cimabue took over from another artist beginning in September of 1301 (modern style).¹ In November of that same year, while still under contract for the cathedral mosaics, he agreed to paint an altarpiece for the Pisan hospital church of Santa Chiara, dedicated to the first female follower of Francis, Clare of Assisi.² That work does not survive, or indeed was perhaps never made, for by March of 1302 Cimabue was dead, as attested by a documentary notice of his heirs as residents of Fiesole.³

Neither of these two documented Pisan commissions can be connected to the Franciscans. The mosaics were commissioned by the officials of the cathedral, and despite the dedication of its church to the Franciscan Clare of Assisi, the hospital was not in fact under the care of the Franciscan Order at the end of the thirteenth century. Yet there is no reason to think that the Pisan contracts would have been vastly different than the lost contracts for the Franciscan works discussed throughout this book. Artists' contracts from the period, when they survive, tend to be rather sparse in their descriptions, concerned primarily with practicalities such as the budget for a project and its materials. A fresh look at the documents for Cimabue's last works in Pisa, however, helps to underscore many of the larger issues about patronage, devotion, and innovation raised throughout this book.

1. There are actually two commissioning documents, one detailing the commission and one, dated November 11, 1301 (modern style) is a record of partial payment for work on the project. For transcriptions of the documents mentioning Cimabue see Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 290–92. Full transcriptions of these documents are in Trenta, pp. 71–95.

2. Archivio di Stato di Pisa, volume 12, hospital of Santa Chiara, nos 29 and 30. It was first published in the nineteenth century by Fontana, 1878. See Bellosi, *Cimabue*, pp. 290–91. The document reads: Magister Cenni dictus Cimabu Pictor condam Pepi de Florentia, de populo sancti Ambrosii, et Iohannes dictus Nuchulus Pictor qui moratur Pisis in Cappella sancti Nicoli et filius Apparecchiati de Luca, et quilibet eorum in solidum per solemnum stipulationem convenerunt et promiserunt fratri Henrico magistro dicti hospitalis pro dicto hospitali recipienti quod hinc ad unum annum proxime venturum eorum manibus propriis facient pingere et laborabunt tabulam unam colonnellis, tabernaculis et predula pictam storiis divine maestatis beate Marie Virginis, apostolorum, angelorum et aliis figuris et picturis de quibus videbitur et placuerit ipsi magistro vel alteri persone

legitime pro dicto hospitali, et unam crucem depicta de argento deaurato ponendam ad tabernaculum de medio dictae tabule. Que picture maestatis divine beate Marie Virginis et apostolorum et aliorum sactorum fiende in colonnellis et predula dictae tabule et planis tabule fiant et fieri debeant de bono et de puro auro floreni, et alie picture fiende in dicta tabula a colonnellis sursum in tabernaculis et angelis passis et scorniciatis fiant et fieri debeant per eos ut dictum est, de bono argento deaurato, ponendam super altari maiori sancti Spiritus ecclesie sancta Clare dicti hospitalis in ea longitudine qua est dictum altare et in ea altitudine de qua videbitur ipsi magistro vel alteri persone pro dicto hospitali. Et quod ipsam tabulam, sic factam et pictam ut dictum est, omnibus eorum expensis ponet super dictum altare fixam et firmam ut ipsi magistro videbitur expedire pro infrascripto salario... Actum Pisis in loco dicti hospitalis, presentibus Puccio filio Giudonis Henronis notarii de cappella sancta Marie maioris et Puccio vinario filio Coscii vinarii de sancto Blasio in ponte testibus ad hec rogatis mcccij; indication XV, ipso die kalendarum novenbris.

3. Bellosi, *Cimabue*, p. 292.



Fig. E.1: Cimabue, *Saint John the Evangelist*, Mosaic, Pisa Cathedral.

The Pisa Cathedral Mosaics

A series of records dated between September 2, 1301 and February 19, 1302 indicate that Cimabue, along with a team of other named artists, received payments on a more or less weekly basis from the city's cathedral *opera*, or building works' administration.⁴ Each entry begins with a reference to 'Cimabue, pictor', listing a payment to him. Work had already begun on the apse decoration at least by April of 1301; documents indicate that Francesco da Pisa was paid as head of the project from then until July of that year. From September on, the payment records make clear that Cimabue, noted each time as 'painter', is the head of the project, a status confirmed by the larger payment he received in comparison to the other artists who are listed. Seven other collaborators are named in the documents: Barile, Cagnasso, Garoccio, Parduccio, Pogavansa, Turetto, and Vanne. The exact role of each is not specified in the payment records. Given that Cimabue is called 'painter', and the fact that his other known works are all paintings, we might speculate that Cimabue created the preparatory drawings, while the other artists might have been engaged in aspects of mosaic production, such as fashioning glass tesserae and setting them according to Cimabue's design.

However, Cimabue's continued presence on the site suggests that he oversaw technical aspects of the project beyond the initial planning stages. As Catherine Harding has shown, a similar workshop structure for mosaic production is attested in the surviving documents for the façade of Orvieto Cathedral, executed several decades later; the head of the project there was also experienced in almost all other stages of the mosaics' making.⁵

Most of the payment records for the Pisa Cathedral apse mosaics simply note the date and amount of the payments the artists' received, but on 19 February, 1302, Cimabue received payment for executing the figure of John the Evangelist (Fig. E.1). This figure—Cimabue's only surviving documented work—must have been the first to be completed in the apse. Stylistic analyses of the finished composition, which features Christ enthroned with Mary and John flanking him in a variation on the Byzantine Deesis iconography (Fig. E.2), have demonstrated that the remaining figures must have been designed by different artists, some at a much later date.⁶ Cimabue did not perhaps have the chance to complete the apse mosaic project in Pisa because less than a month later he was dead, as attested by a document dated March 19, 1302 stating that his heirs were residing in Fiesole.⁷

Although many later restorations make such comparisons difficult, the figure of John shows a sophisticated softening of lines and a careful blending of flesh tones via gradations of tesserae that

⁴ Pisa, Archivio di Stato, Opera del Duomo, 79. Partial transcriptions of the documents are available in Bellosi, Cimabue, pp. 291–92.

see Bellosi, Cimabue, p. 283.

⁵ For partial transcriptions of these documents see Bellosi, p. 292. Bellosi here notes that the document mentioning the heirs of Cimabue in Fiesole was published by Davidsohn in 1927 but can no longer be found in the Florentine archives.

is not seen in the figures of Mary and Christ. As was common in other mosaics of the period, stone as well as glass tesserae in a spectrum of tones, from white to brown, were used to render John's flesh. We can also compare this subtle rendering of John's skin to that on Cimabue's crucifix for Santa Croce, as discussed in Chapter 5. Cimabue's skill at painterly modeling is very much in evidence in the figure of John, and it allows us to further imagine how the use of lead white pigment must have enhanced the murals at Assisi, as argued in Chapter 1. The details of John's face and hands, as well as his drapery, are modeled using careful contrasts of light and dark tesserae suggesting the natural play of light on the figure. White is used selectively, particularly on the figure's face, as well as in a subtle, slim band tracing the interior outline of John's halo. The placement of white here allows the halo, rendered in gold tesserae, to stand out from the field of similar gold tesserae surrounding the figure. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Cimabue and his fellow artists used white tesserae similarly to enunciate the compositions in the mosaics of the baptistery of Florence.⁸

Cimabue's previous work in Florence, both on the baptistery mosaics as well as his enthroned Madonna commissioned by the Franciscans in Pisa, surely heightened his prestige in Tuscany. It is not hard to see why the cathedral opera in Pisa would choose Cimabue, at this point a well-established master, to be in charge of the apse mosaics, the focal point of the cathedral's liturgical space. Cimabue's reputation for monumental art was also doubtless cemented by his successful completion of the apse and transept murals at Assisi. Thus the Pisa mosaic commission allows us to appreciate again just how eminent Cimabue was in his own time. His commissions for the Franciscans both added to and were a result of this increasing renown.

An Altarpiece for the Santa Chiara Hospital Church

Before moving to an analysis of Cimabue's contract for the Santa Chiara altarpiece, it is useful to consider briefly what little is known about the hospital church at the time of the commission. The history of the hospital itself is connected to Pisa's political fortunes in the mid-thirteenth century. Because the city formed an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, Pisa was excommunicated in 1241 by Pope Gregory IX. Insisting that the city pledge loyalty to an emperor recognized by the Pope, Alexander IV revoked the excommunication in 1257, and as an act of civic penance, the city was required to build a hospital. The foundation was overseen by a Franciscan sent to Pisa by the Pope, Mansueto Tanganello, with the assistance of other papal legates, including none other than Bonaventure.⁹ Santa Chiara's reach extended well beyond members of the Franciscan Order and their lay followers, however. The massive hospital complex was constructed adjacent to the Campo dei Miracoli, a centre of pilgrimage, and it incorporated a number of preexisting

⁸ See Boskovits, 'Florentine Mosaics', pp. 495–96.

⁹ The hospital and church were founded by Franciscans and dedicated to a Franciscan saint, but by the late thirteenth century, the hospital was in fact administered by members of



Fig. E.2: Cimabue and later artists, Apse Mosaic, Pisa Cathedral.

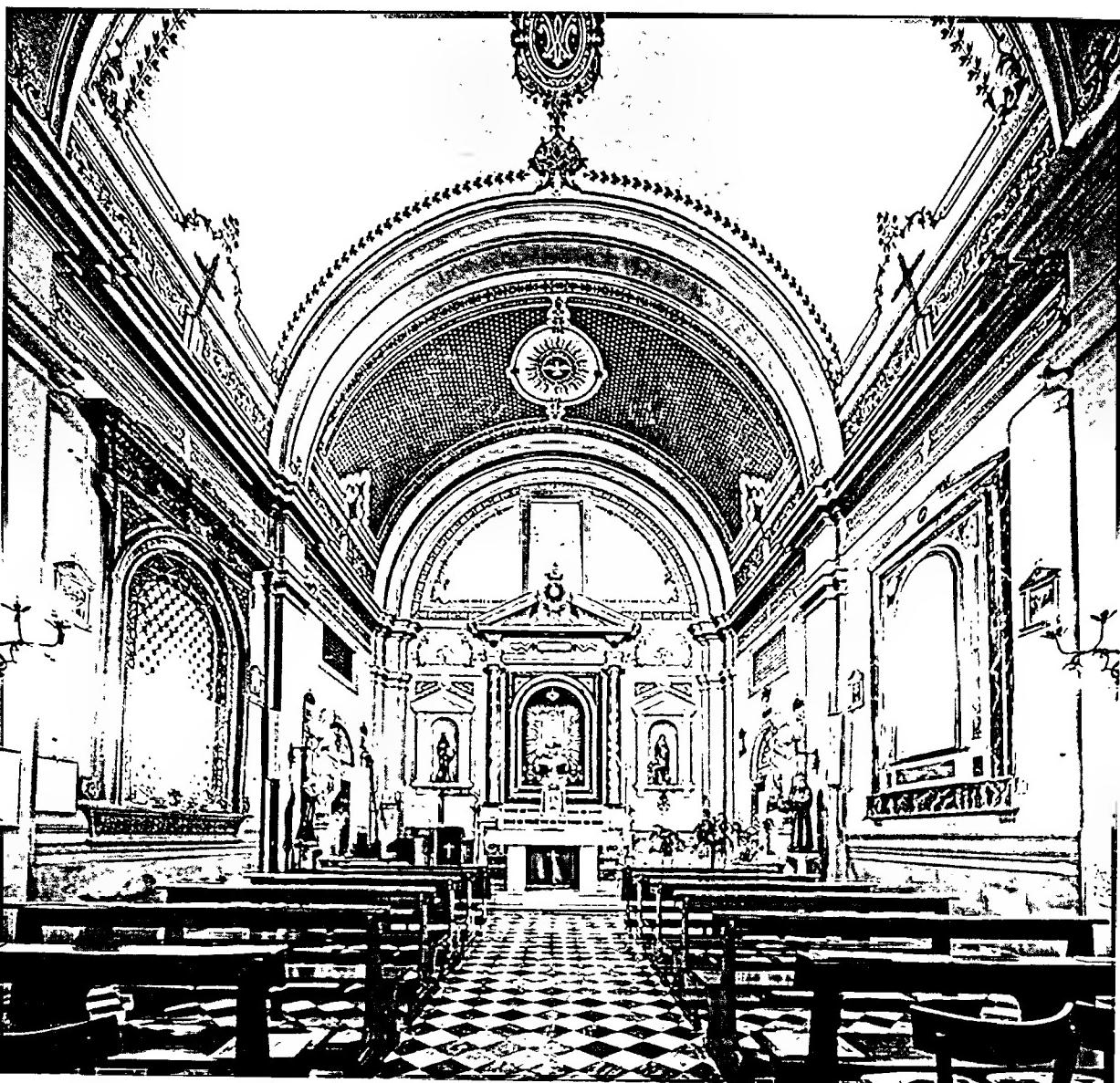


Fig. E.3 Hospital Church of Santa Chiara, Pisa.

buildings. Its structure resembled a monastic complex and included a cloister, church, infirmaries, cemetery, and garden surrounded by a wall. The hospital served as a pilgrims' hospice as well as a locus of charity for the sick and poor.

Today the hospital church retains nothing of its thirteenth-century appearance, for the original structure was completely destroyed prior to its rebuilding in 1784 (Fig. E.3). The church's size and appearance at the time Cimabue was commissioned to paint the altarpiece are thus, unfortunately, unknown.¹⁰ We can be reasonably certain that the original church was rather intimate in scale, as is the present church and as per other examples of churches that were created as part of a larger hospital complex in the thirteenth century.¹¹ Even if we can presume a small size for Santa Chiara, we cannot know whether or not the church had a *tramezzo* or other architectural device separating the choir from the nave, and thus we cannot be certain that the altarpiece was intended to be visible

¹⁰ See Vaglini, *La Storia*, p. 30.

¹¹ Even when such churches were enlarged during the Renaissance, as at Santissima Annunziata and Sant'Egidio

in Florence, they remained relatively small in comparison to non-hospital churches. See Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital*, p. 121.

throughout the church. Given the permeability of such choir spaces, however, as mentioned in previous chapters, it seems likely that the altarpiece was designed to be seen by the public at least at times. Like other hospital churches, such as Siena's church of the Santissima Annunziata at Santa Maria della Scala and Florence's Sant'Egidio at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, Santa Chiara would have been the site of religious celebrations connected to the activities of the hospital, a locus for curing the soul as well as the body, as John Henderson has observed.¹² The hospital church would have served a wide variety of audiences in this capacity, from pilgrims, to doctors, to members of religious orders who worked there, to family members of those who were being treated by the hospital. Santa Chiara, like other churches connected to charitable institutions, would therefore have sought lay offerings actively. The hospital's wealth and importance is indicated by the fact that the friars could afford to hire Cimabue, whose fame was established by his work at Assisi and Florence, and who was under contract from the city's cathedral at the same time.

A New Kind of Altarpiece

The terms of the contract between Cimabue and the friars for the Santa Chiara altarpiece can be summarized as follows. Cimabue, listed first, is hired along with another painter, Giovanni di Apparechiato, known as Giovanni Nuchulus, by Master Henry, a friar from the hospital.¹³ The painters are to paint a panel, to be completed within a year, that includes columns, a tabernacle or tabernacles, and a predella. It will depict the Virgin Mary in majesty along with apostles, angels, saints, and other figures and pictures that will be determined by representatives of the hospital. It is also to include a cross of gilt silver cross placed on a tabernacle in the middle of the work. The altarpiece must be embellished with pure gold and silver. The size of the work is partly specified; it is to be the width of the high altar, which is dedicated to the Holy Spirit, and it is to be of a height determined by the commissioners. The ensemble is to be placed on said high altar, and the master of the hospital will see to the expenses.

Scholarly interest in the Santa Chiara commission centres on the fact that it is the first known use of the word 'predella' in an artist's contract. Starting in the fourteenth century, altarpieces were frequently constructed using a predella, a lateral base or platform that raised the altarpiece's height and could also provide an additional space for figural decoration. The Santa Chiara contract seems to mark the beginning of the predella's history, for no altarpieces with predellas survive from the thirteenth century. Interested in what Cimabue's apparently novel predella looked like in terms of the overall work, several scholars have scrutinized the Santa Chiara hospital contract in attempts to reconstruct the altarpiece.¹⁴ What these previous analyses fail to note, however, is how this document suggests the nature of the collaborations between Cimabue and his patrons.

The attention paid to precious materials in the commissioning document for the altarpiece indicates the wealth of the hospital. Master Henry wants to be sure that Cimabue and Giovanni use pure gold leaf.¹⁵ The integrity of the silver used for the cross, which is to be gilded, is also specified. The artists are not to use alloys or lesser quality metals, and thus that the patrons will receive what they are paying for. The notation of costly materials like gold and silver in the contract is often seen in other artists' contracts that survive from the fourteenth century.¹⁶ Value and price are at stake in such specifications; they also reveal underlying concerns about beauty and luxury. The divine

¹² Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital*, p. 58.

¹³ The term 'magister' or 'master' was used as a general title indicating one who held authority.

¹⁴ For proposed reconstructions see Hager, *Die Anfänge*, p. 113; Prieser, *Das Entstehen*, pp. 200–02; Ayer, 'A Reconstruction', pp. 12–17. Raggianti claimed that San Francesco

Madonna now in the Louvre was the work described. See Raggianti, *La Pittura*, p. 110.

¹⁵ On the manufacture and price of gold leaf see O'Malley, *The Business of Art*, pp. 48–51.

¹⁶ See the discussion of silver and gold in contracts in O'Malley, p. 8.

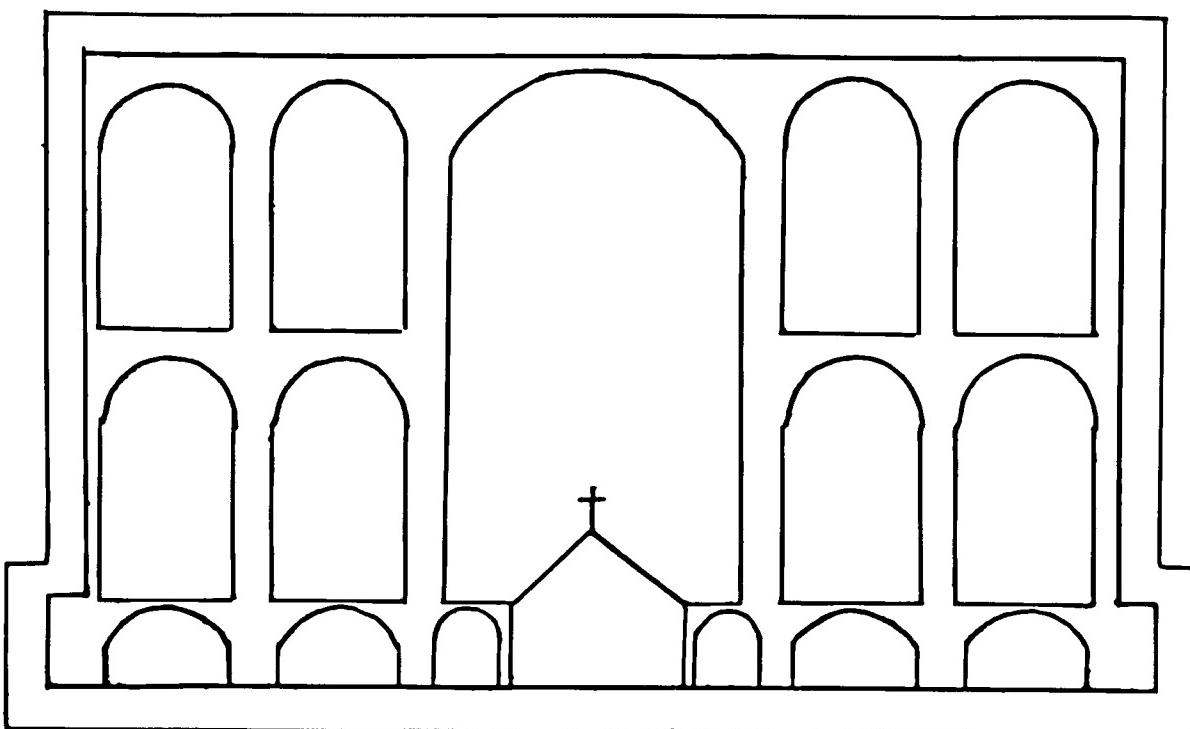


Fig. E.4: Reconstruction of Cimabue's Santa Chiara Altarpiece.

Virgin is to be honored via the use of gold to enhance her image, and Christ and the saints are also to be glorified via the inclusion of a silver gilt cross. Although other pigments are not mentioned in the Santa Chiara contract, the specification of precious metals reflects a kindred interest in the effects and meanings of materials that I addressed in my discussions of Cimabue's use of lead white at Assisi in Chapter 1. Similar to the way Cimabue employed white pigments for visual effects, the altarpiece's gleaming gilded surfaces would enhance the play of light within the church. Echoed here is an interest in optics in the importance placed on metallic surfaces, which would reflect the divine light that illuminated the images of the holy figures and direct it back towards the viewer.¹⁷ As the ensemble was intended for an altar, this reflected light would also symbolize the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the process of transformation enacted in the Mass.

The contract also specifies certain elements to be included in the painted ensemble. The altarpiece is to have columns, a predella, a tabernacle (or tabernacles) at its centre, and a silver gilt cross. The stipulation of these features does not, however, offer enough information to reconstruct the appearance of the work, although Helmut Hager, Arno Prieser, and Elizabeth Ayer have attempted to do so.¹⁸ Ayer, following a suggestion by James Stubblebine, determined that the commission document specifies that a tabernacle (how she translates the plural *tabernaculis*) is to be placed in the middle of the work (Fig. E.4). The term tabernacle could also refer to a baldachin and has been interpreted to mean a gabled structure or sculpted arches that separate the scenes. Ayer and Stubblebine, however, suggested that the tabernacle in the Santa Chiara contract indicates a lockable container that is to be placed on the high altar to contain a pyx holding the consecrated host. From the thirteenth century *Constitutions* of the Dominican Humbert of Romans, we know that such a tabernacle was a required element of an altar.¹⁹

¹⁷ For discussion of gold and the idea of divine reflection of light see Lakey, 'The Materiality', pp. 119–36, and Lakey, 'The Curious Case', pp. 13–30.

¹⁸ Preiser, *Das Entstehen*, pp. 7–13.

¹⁹ Cannon points out that these cabinets do not survive from a central Italian Dominican church. Cites a document describing a tabernaculus for the high altar of San Eustorgio in Milan, made in Venice, Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, p. 112.



Fig. E.5: Giuliano da Rimini, *Virgin and Child with Saints*, Tempera and gold on wood, 164 x 300 cm, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

Ayer proposed that the altarpiece for Santa Chiara contained a tabernacle topped by a silver cross within its structure at the centre of the work's predella. Above the predella, a large image of the Virgin and Child was to be placed, surrounded by smaller images separated by columns. As an example of a work close in format to the reconstruction Ayers offered, she pointed to an ensemble by Giuliano da Rimini, signed and dated in 1307 and now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Fig. E.5).²⁰ Giuliano's work does feature an image of the Virgin and Child at the centre and scenes separated by painted columns, but no predella or tabernacle survive from the ensemble. Indeed, despite the apparent necessity of a tabernacle on the altar, to my knowledge, no altarpiece from this period survives that contains a tabernacle within it, which is what makes Ayer's reconstruction less than completely convincing.²¹ Although the exact reconstruction remains elusive, the inclusion of apparently new elements—a tabernacle within the structure and the predella—testifies to the kind of experimentation that we have seen elsewhere in Cimabue's commissions for the Franciscans, particularly in the new format evidenced by his *vita Christi*, treated in Chapter 6.

In fact, in creating a work with a predella, and perhaps also a tabernacle, Cimabue and those who hired him at Santa Chiara were at the forefront of new developments in the history of panel painting. As Joanna Cannon has pointed out in her research on Dominican contexts, painted panels did not become regular features of high altars until the early fourteenth century, so the fact that this ensemble was meant to be placed on a high altar is itself rather novel. In including a predella—an element that would raise the height of the painted ensemble—Cimabue must have thought carefully about the function of this type of painted work on an altar. The word predella is also sometimes used in early documents to describe the *suppedaneum*, the wooden platform placed directly in

²⁰ On this painting see the catalogue entry in Boston, p. 37.

²¹ Ayer sees this as an example of Cimabue's old-fashioned

ways rather than as an example of his forging a new path. See Ayer, 'A Reconstruction', p. 17.



Fig. E.6: Simone Martini, *Polyptych of Santa Caterina*, Tempera and gold on wood, 195 x 340 cm, Museo di San Matteo, Pisa.

front of the altar upon which the priest stands while performing mass.²² The appropriation of the term for a painted ensemble must be related to the idea that the predella elevates the altarpiece's main painted image and increases its visibility, particularly when a priest would be blessing and lifting the host up while kneeling or standing in front of it. A further association exists between the Eucharist and the predella because it was that element of the work that was placed directly on the altar. Early predellas such as that included in Simone Martini's altarpiece painted in 1320 for the Dominican Church of Santa Caterina in Pisa often feature Eucharistic imagery; in this case there is a beautiful depiction of the Man of Sorrows at the predella's centre (Fig. E.6).²³ The idea of a predella seems to have caught on precisely at this moment, because one is also specified in a 1302 record of payment for an altarpiece by Duccio.²⁴

The Man of Sorrows on Simone's altarpiece is positioned at the centre of the predella, directly below the larger image of the Maestà. The alignment of these images reinforces the association between Mary and the Eucharist, a theme seen in several works of Cimabue's made for the Franciscans, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. In Cimabue's Santa Chiara altarpiece, if we follow Ayer's suggested reconstruction, a tabernacle was intended to be placed in a similar position at the centre of the predella, below an image of the Virgin. As an actual cabinet containing the consecrated Host, it would also refer to the image of Mary above it, affirming her role as the container of the body of Christ. If indeed Cimabue intended to include a tabernacle within the altarpiece's predella, it was a potential solution to the problem of the crowded altar. When all of the objects needed for

²² Preiser, *Das Entstehen*, pp. 7–13.

²³ On this painting see Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 139–

⁴⁷ Similar Eucharistic imagery can be seen on Giotto's Stefaneschi triptych; see Kessler, 'Giotto e Roma', p. 94.

the celebration of mass were placed upon the altar, including candles, a cross, a chalice, paten, missal, and a tabernacle, the view of the altarpiece might be obscured in part.²⁵ One remedy might be to move the tabernacle elsewhere, as is indicated in an early fourteenth-century document, cited by Joanna Cannon, that records a bequest for a tabernacle that is to be placed 'on or behind the high altar'.²⁶ If the tabernacle were integrated within the predella, as the commission document for the Santa Chiara altarpiece seems to indicate, it would relieve some of the crowding of the altar. This document therefore hints that Cimabue was seeking new solutions to address practical problems that might hinder the work of art's function in religious practices. Again, however, the lack of surviving tabernacles within predellas precludes any certainty about whether or not Cimabue's innovation caught on. By the time Simone painted his polyptych for Santa Caterina, an image at the centre of the predella came to be preferred. Perhaps the placement of themes relating to the Eucharist in that particular position has its roots in the kind of object Cimabue was commissioned to create at Santa Chiara, with a container for the host within the predella.

Shared Agency at Santa Chiara

Further concern for placement and audience is seen in the Santa Chiara contract's specification of pictures and images of angels and saints in addition to the Virgin. As opposed to the large gabled panels Cimabue likely created for the *ecclesia laicorum*, such as the Maestà for San Francesco in Pisa, an altarpiece like this one was designed for more intimate spaces within the choir enclosure, and thus an assemblage of smaller images, perhaps alongside larger ones, was more appropriate to that setting. What is most revealing about this particular detail of the contract, however, is what is not said. The iconographic specifications are vague; we do not know exactly which saints or stories were supposed to be included. Those details are left to be worked out between the representatives of the hospital and the artists. The implication is that there will be further dialogue between the commissioners and the artists. The commission document therefore evinces shared agency in the work's creation; the lack of specifications point to leeway given to the artists, and yet the work is ultimately subject to the approval of the representatives of the hospital.

Similar evidence for shared agency between commissioners and artists is found in the contract between Duccio and the Laudesi confraternity for the Rucellai Madonna, dated 1285.²⁷ The agreement was made between Duccio and the confraternity's two rectors, as well as two supervisors elected to oversee the commission. Although the confraternity met in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, where the painting would have been placed, the document includes only one Dominican, fra Paolo (d. 1332), a lay brother of the convent, who is recorded as a witness. The confraternity supplied the wooden panel upon which Duccio was to paint 'a most beautiful picture to the honor of the blessed and glorious Virgin Mary'. At his own expense, the artist was to paint the Mary, her son, and 'other figures', and to gild and embellish the panel, and if the painting is not 'embellished according to the wishes and desires' of the commissioners, Duccio was not to be paid. Although the terms of payment are somewhat different in the Santa Chiara document, Duccio was here similarly given freedom to do the work, but it is ultimately subject to the approval of his patrons. Given the risk Duccio would be assuming if his patrons did not like the painting, he must have surely at the

²⁴ In 1302 Duccio received 48 lire as payment for a Maestà and predella to be located on the altar of the house of the Nove in Siena. For this document see Satkowski, *Duccio*, p. 67.

²⁵ Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, 'there was a tension between these two categories of object—tabernacle and altarpiece', pp. 153.

²⁶ Cannon also mentions another tabernacle cited in a document dated 1314 from Lucca, specifying a tabernacle to be placed 'on or behind the high altar'. See Cannon, *Religious Poverty*, p. 153.

²⁷ Satkowski, *Duccio*, pp. 51–53.

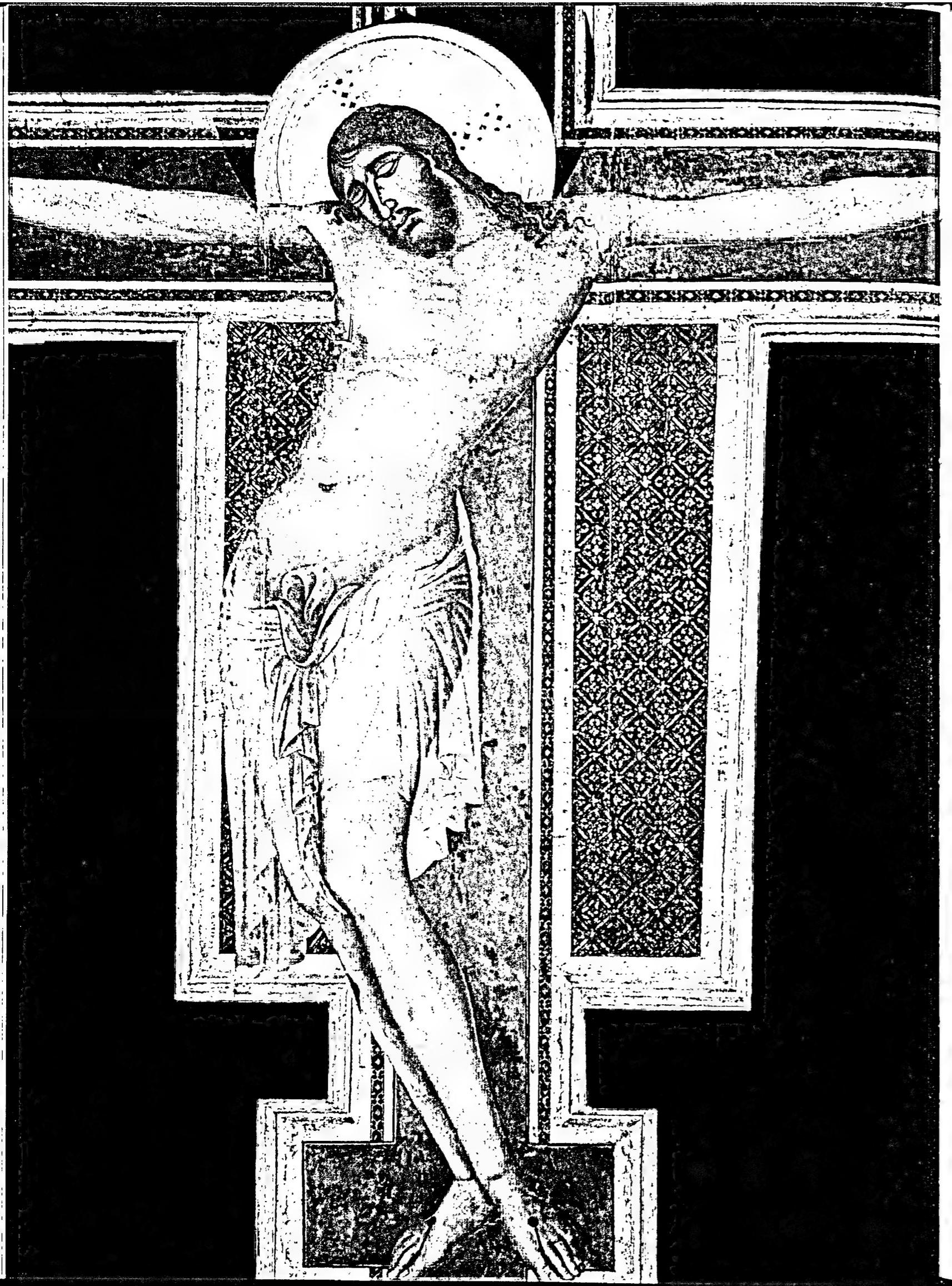
very least discussed his ideas for the work with them before or during its completion. Agency is collective here, including the artist, the confraternity members, and to a lesser degree in this case, the friars of Santa Maria Novella where the picture will be placed. Similarly, the Santa Chiara altarpiece can be seen as a collaboration between Cimabue, Giovanni, Master Henry and the other representatives of the hospital.

The Legacy of Intersecting Histories

As I have sought to demonstrate throughout this study, the concept of shared agency should also be extended to that of the viewers of these works. The evident concern for the use and function of the Santa Chiara altarpiece, with its predella and tabernacle in the service of Eucharistic celebrations, reflects a keen awareness on the part of the commissioners for the work's reception. Cimabue's works for the Franciscans likewise evince a consciousness of the viewer's role in an artwork's ultimate meaning. This can be seen throughout the murals in the Upper Church at Assisi, whether in the symbolism of white pigments, the engagement of the senses through compositional devices, or the encouragement of the *vita mixta* through innovative iconography. The Marian imagery in the Upper Church, tied to the mapping of the global dissemination of the Word of God depicted in the Evangelists' vault, would prompt awareness of the daily Incarnation taking place via the transubstantiation of the host on the high altar. In the Lower Church, Cimabue's Maestà sought to promote the sanctity of Francis as well as the collective memory of the Order's origins on the part of friars and pilgrims. By painting Christ's flesh in a newly veristic mode in his Santa Croce Cross, Cimabue encouraged devotional focus again on Christ's Incarnation, encouraging ocular communion among the cross' mostly lay public. The viewer's agency is seen not only in these monumental artistic projects, but also in works created for personal devotion, such as Cimabue's *vita Christi*. The potential for Cimabue's *vita Christi* and other ensembles like it to be read in a variety of challenging and sophisticated ways, and by diverse audiences including women, indicates that the viewer's needs spurred the invention of that new type of object.

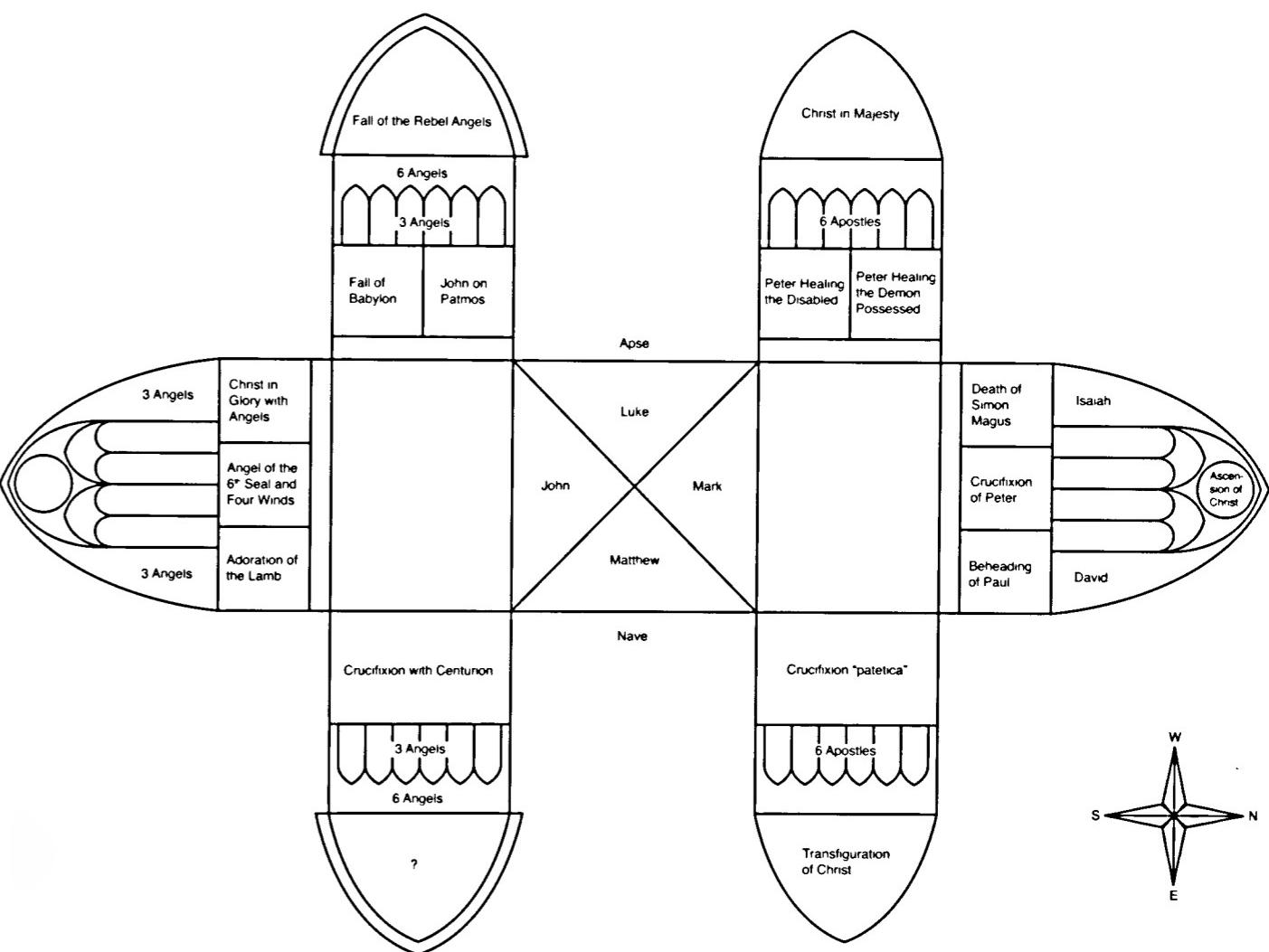
As the Pisan works commissioned at the end of his life demonstrate, Cimabue's creative abilities were deployed by patrons outside the Franciscan Order. And yet because most of what survives from his artistic output is connected to the Franciscans, an investigation of those works in light of the Order's ambitions and ideologies sheds new light on Cimabue's career more generally. Considered together, the intersecting histories of Cimabue and the Franciscans prompt a new understanding of how the late thirteenth century was a nodal era in the history of art. As seen in my analysis of his Santa Croce cross, Cimabue was indeed interested in naturalism, but his contributions to artistic *renovatio* extend much further than this evident stylistic shift. And although Cimabue was indeed influenced by examples of classical art, appropriated during his formative years in Rome, his innovations reach far beyond revivals of classicism as Vasari and others understood it. Cimabue's use of bright and transformative lead white at Assisi, his promotion of sensorial experiences through formal and iconographic inventions, and his experiments with new formats in panel painting reveal his wide-ranging and multifaceted engagement with the intellectual and spiritual ideas of the Franciscans. Their collaborations informed many of the novelties seen in the art of the succeeding generation. Giotto and the other artists who worked at Assisi, for example, surely learned from the technical, iconographic, and compositional inventions within Cimabue's murals there. Cimabue's novel takes on narrative painting, influenced by female Franciscan devotional practices, must have also inspired innovative pictorial cycles like the ones seen on Duccio's Maestà, as well as the development of more complex altarpieces like it. We have also seen how Cimabue's distinctive approach to standard subject matter like the Maestà

and the crucifix advertised the Franciscan Order and advanced devotion among the friars and the lay public. Understanding Cimabue's contributions within this Franciscan context therefore allows for a more nuanced vision of how artists, patrons, and viewers together shaped a complex, multifaceted era of *renovatio* in art.

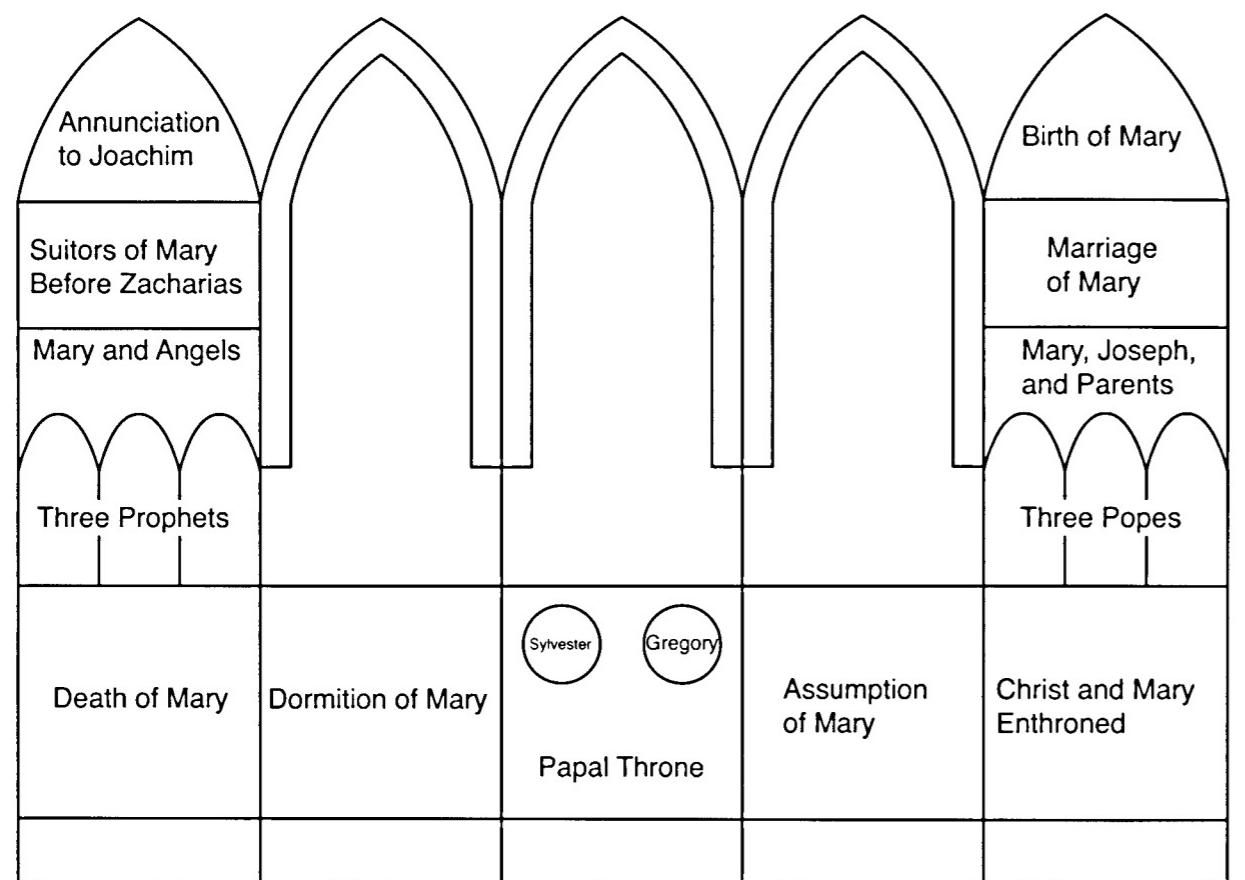


APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Map of Murals in Transepts of Upper Church of Saint Francis, Assisi (after Frugoni, *Quale Francesco*)



Appendix 2: Map of Murals in the apse of the Upper Church, Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi (after Frugoni, *Quale Francesco*)



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